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20th Century Indian Interpretations of BHAGAVADGITA : Tilak, Gandhi & Aurobindo

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1987

By

P.M. Thomas

Published for

The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore, by the I.S.P.C.K., Delhi

1987

Published by the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Post Box 1585, Kashmere Gate, Delhi-110 006, for the CISRS, Post Box 4600, 17 Millers Road, Bangalore-560 046.

Theology Library

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

First Published 1987.
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Printed in India by Printsman, New Delhi-110 005.

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Acknowledgements

The theme of this study was conceived under the influence of Professor J.G. Arapura. He, as my supervisor, suggested the main areas of research and rendered invaluable help at every stage. The author acknowledges gratefully the encouragement he received from Professor Arapura during moments of disappointments and delusions. He, like Arjuna's charioteer of old, guided me to the completion of this work. But, when I look back to the long years of my student life with Professor Arapura, the help I received in preparing this thesis is very little compared to the greater lessons of spirituality I learnt from him. I am not mincing words—words are powerless anyway in communicating deeper feelings—when I say that he has instilled in me a new love for the study of comparative religion and a new approach to spirituality itself. This, I consider, has more abiding significance than the methodology and contents of a thesis.

Professor Paul Younger who served on my Advisory Committee has been my friend for a long time and it was through him I knew of McMaster University. Throughout my student years at McMaster he has been my friend and teacher. He has rendered great help by correcting the manuscript and making many valuable suggestions.

Part of my research was done at the Centre for Advanced Study in Philosophy in the Banaras Hindu University, India, during 1971-72. I would like to express my deep appreciation to the members of the faculty at the Centre, especially to its director Dr. K.N. Devaraj and to Professor Sivaraman who was then a Reader at the Centre. Professor Sivaraman kindly loaned me some of the rare books on the *Gīta* from his library and also helped me to find my way in Banaras where I was a stranger.

P.M. Thomas

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The *Bhagavadgītā* is the most popular scripture of Hinduism and as such it has been translated into all the major languages of India. Its influence in shaping the religious ideology of India is second to none. The teachers *(ācāryas)* of various schools of thought wrote commentaries on the *Gītā* to establish the validity of their doctrines. The *Gītā* is able to shelter various religious doctrines because its "teaching is universal whatever may have been its origins".[1] The *Gītā* contains both "the essential principles of a spiritual religion"[2] and "the most outstanding treatises on the Philosophy of Human Conduct"[3] at the same time. Though the *Gītā* is an episode in the great epic *Mahābhārata*, which is considered as the fifth Veda, "as a scripture of Hinduism it stands apart from the epic.[4]" According to Vinoba Bhave, Vyasa, the mythic author of the epic has taken out the cream of the whole *Mahābhārata* and put it in the *Gītā*, "Standing in the middle of the epic', he adds, "the *Gītā* is like an elevated lamp which throws its light on the whole of *Mahābhārata*".[5]

"The Gospel of Hinduism"

The *ācāryas* of the Vedanta tradition consider the *Gītā* as a Vedantic text. They interpreted the *Gītā* from this angle

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[1]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1966, p. 5.

[2]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1970, p. 11.

[3]Shripad Krishna Belvalkar, *The Bhagavadgitā*, Bilvakunja Publishing House, Poona, 1943, p. XIII.

[4]C. Rajagopalachari, *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1964, p. 12.

[5]Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gītā*, Sarva-seva-sangh Prakashan, Varanasi, 1964, p. 1.

and elevated it to one of the three foundations of Vedanta philosophy, the *prasthānatraya*, along with the Upaniṣads and the *Brahma-sūtras*. Of this triple foundation, or "scriptural trinity" as some modern Vedantins call it,[6] the Upaniṣads occupy a place of pre-eminence. According to the orthodox Hindu tradition only the Vedās, the Upaniṣads being part of the Vedas, are revealed scripture (*śruti*). All other scriptures, such as the *Brahmasūtra*, the *Gītā*, and others depend upon the *śruti*, as inference depends on perception. These scriptures are categorized as *smṛti* and their validity depends on their conformity with the original revelation. In the case of the *Gītā*, its teachings represent a historical-responsive revelation through an incarnation, *avatāra*. It is not a total revelation, as Śankara interprets *avatāra* as only partial *(amśena)* descent of Viṣṇu as Kṛṣṇa, son of Devaki and Vasudeva. Therefore, Śankara does not grant an independent status to the two latter texts of the *prasthānatraya*. In his introduction to the *Gītā-Bhāsya*, Śankara puts in a nutshell the relevance of the *Gītā* in these words, "This *Gītāśāstra* is the essence of the meaning of the whole Vedic teaching in brief...a knowledge of its teaching leads to the realization of all human aspirations".[7] The famous verse in *Gītādhyānam* expresses the same thought through a simile; the Upaniṣads are the cows, Kṛṣṇa the milker, Arjuna the calf, and the *Gītā* the milk.[8] This shows the dependence of the *Gītā* on the Upaniṣads. However, there is no mention of dependence or subordination in the text itself. Śankara and other Vedantic schoolmen seek to reconcile this question of the authority of the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā* in their *bhaṣyas*.

The modern exegetes of the *Gītā* while broadly accepting the position of the *Gītā* as a *smṛti* text, also present it as the gospel of Hinduism. There are several reasons for this greater emphasis on the *Gitā*. First of all, there is a deli-

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[6]Swami Chidbhavananda, *The Bhagavadgītā*, Sri Ramakrishna Tapovanam, Tirupparaitturai, 1969, p. 1.

[7]*taditaṁ gītāśāstraṁ samastavedārthasārasṁgrahabhutaṁ... samastapuruṣarthasiddhim.*

[8]*sarvopaniṣado gāvo dogdhā gopāla nandanah partha vatsah sudhir bhakta dugdham gītamrtam mahat.*

berate attempt in the *Gītā* to bring together different strains of Hindu thought and to provide justification for a variety of religious practices. Secondly, the various *yogas* of the *Gītā* lend themselves to a socio-centric interpretation which is relevant to the needs of contemporary India. Above all, the spirit of toleration and the call for equanimity implied in the *Gītā* have found favour with the leaders of Indian thought. These teachings in a way augment the modern Hindu concept of "equality of all religions". Along with this, some authors lay great emphasis on the very nature of the discourse in the *Gītā*. God in the form of Kṛṣṇa addresses man. Kurtakoti, one of the reigning patriarchs in the four apostolates reputedly founded by Śankara himself, argues that Arjuna symbolises mankind, for his other name is *nara*, man. He writes, "So there is scriptural sanction for taking the *Gītā* not as a mere talk to Arjuna, but an object lesson to all humanity throughout eternity".[9] There are some commentators who hold that the *Gītā* is the only flawless Hindu scripture. C.V. Vasudeva Bhattathiry, a present-day Malayalam writer refers to one of them. This writer argues that the reactionary Brahmins compiled the Vedas to perpetuate their superiority and the epics too, in the main, follow the lines of the Vedas. But, he adds, in the case of the *Gītā* it is a direct revelation to a non-Brahmin, Arjuna.[10]

Some scholars even elevate the *Gītā* to the status of *śruti* and as the true text of genuine Hinduism or *Sanātana Dharma* in that it attempts to preserve the social order.[11] Swami Chidbhavananda views the *Gītā* as a *śruti* text because it contains an exhaustive collection of spiritual laws. "These spiritual laws when applied to life are called *Sanātana-Dharma*—eternal order and righteousness. The *Gītā* may

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[9]Kurtakoti (Śrī Śankaracarya) "Towards a New World Order—the Gita", *Studies in the Gītā*, ed. by M.D. Paradkar, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1970, p. 41.

[10]Cf. C.V. Vasudeva Bhattathiry, *Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā*, (in Malayalam) H & C. Stores, Kunnamkulam, 1971, p. 3.

[11]Cf. C. Rajagopalachari, *Bhagavad-gītā*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1964, p. 12.

therefore be treated as a manual of *Sanātana Dharma*".[12] One of the grounds to support the effort by certain exegetes to place the *Gītā* at the same level as the Upaniṣads is the colophon at the end of each chapter: *ity śrimad bhagavadgitā-sūpaniṣatṣu brahmàvidyāyām yogasāstre*. V.R. Kalyanasundara Śastri claims that knowledge of Brahman (*brahmaśāstra*) and *yogaśāstra*, union with Brahman, are the purports of the Upaniṣads, and the *Gītā* continues these through its revelation to Arjuna. He also holds that the colophon that describes the *Gītā* as an Upaniṣad is reliable.[13] B.G. Tilak thinks that although these enunciative words are not to be found in the original *Bhārata*, they appear in all the editions of the *Gītā* and therefore "one may draw the inference that, that mode of enunciation must have come into vogue, when the *Gītā* was for the first time separated from the *Mahābhārata*".[14] It is clear that one cannot build an argument to support the *śruti* status of the *Gitā* from the colophon, for scholars like Belvalkar observe that the colophon is much later than the text.[15]

There is no internal evidence in the text as such where the *Gītā* claims to be a supra-historical revelation. On the other hand, Kṛṣṇa speaks of an independent revelation when he says, "This same ancient *yoga* has been today declared to thee by Me; for thou art My friend; and this is the supreme secret."[16] In handing down this "supreme secret", Kṛṣṇa does not relate it to the Vedas. Radhakrishnan says that this teaching to Arjuna "is a renewal, a re-discovery, a restoration of knowledge long forgotten."[17] He goes on to add, "Religious revelation is not a past event, it is that which continues to be".[18] We may infer from Radhakrishnan's statements that

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[12]Swami Chidbhavananda, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[13]V.R. Kalyanasundara Śastri, "The *Gitā* and the Upaniṣads", *The Vedanta Kesari*, Vol. LV, No. 2 (June 68) pp. 98-99.

[14]B.G. Tilak, *Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā-Rahasya*, Tilak Brothers, Poona, 3rd ed. 1971, p. 3.

[15]S.K. Belvalkar, *op. cit.*, p. XXIX.

[16]*The Bhagavadgitā*, IV, 3, (In this study, we follow S. Radhakrishnan's translation of the *Gītā* and the text, unless otherwise stated).

[17]S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

[18]*loc. cit.*

though the revelation in the *Gītā* is given through an *avatāra*, it is the continuation of the Vedic revelation.

A few statements by Indian writers on the *Gītā* would bring home to us the reverence with which they approach this text, these writers are at one in establishing the authority of the *Gītā* "for the understanding of the supreme ends of life"[19] and to serve as "a gate opening on the whole world of spiritual truth and experience".[20] K.M. Munshi believes that it "is an intensely human document, a guide for every human situation", and in his experience it "has been a pillar of fire leading me from darkness into life".[21] M.K. Gandhi speaks of the *Gītā* as "a spiritual reference book"[22] and as an "Eternal Mother" who serves him "as an unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life".[23] Vinoba Bhave speaks in the same vein and affirms that his heart and mind received more nourishment from the *Gītā* than his body has from his mother's milk. He says, "The *Gītā* is the Upaniṣad of Upaniṣads because Lord Krishna has drawn the milk of all the Upaniṣhads and given it in the form of the *Gītā* to the whole world".[24] B.G. Tilak holds the view that there is no other work in the whole Sanskrit literature which explains the principles of Hinduism as succintly and unambiguously as the *Gītā*[25] and Kṛṣṇa gave this teaching to Arjuna when his (Kṛṣṇa's) mind was in the highest yogic state. For Tilak, *Gītā* is "as authoritative and venerable as the Vedas themselves."[26]

When we turn to the commentaries on the *Gītā* by members of various modern monastic orders we see statements

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[19]*Ibid.*, p. 6.

[20]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[21]K.M. Munshi, *Bhagavadgītā and Modern Life*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1964, p. 19.

[22]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, or *The Gītā According to Gandhi*, translated by Mahadev Desai, Navajivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1970, p. 126.

[23]M.K. Gandhi, *The Teaching of the Gītā*, ed. by Anand T. Hingorani, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1971, p. 45.

[24]Vinoba Bhave, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[25]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. XXV, cf. p. 1.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 2.

extolling the *Gītā* as the scripture of all religions. Some of them go to the extent of saying that "all we need of spiritual truth for the spiritual life is to be found in the *Gītā*.[27] A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada categorically states, "...This one book, ***B****hagavadgītā*, will suffice because it is the essence of all Vedic literature and it is spoken by the supreme Personality of Godhead".[28] Swami Chidbhavananda holds that because of the *Gītā's* masterly exposition of the all-absorbing issues of human life "the *Bhagavadgītā* may be assigned the unique status of the Scripture Universal".[29] The author of the commentary *Bhavārthabodhini* (in Malyalam) echoes this view. "The teachings of the *Gīta* are given to the whole humanity for the attainment of the final goal, salvation".[30] Another Malayalam commentator says, "The *Gītā* contains all the laws of human conduct, all the principles of worldly transactions and all spiritual sciences for the entire humanity irrespective of caste and creed."[31] Swami Sivananda believes that in the "whole world-literature there is no book so elevated and so inspiring as the *Gīta*.".[32] These are only a few selections from the innumerable statements of modern Indian religious leaders. They indicate the influence of the *Gītā* on the hearts and minds of millions of Indians. The All India Hindu conference in its session at Calcutta some time back passed a resolution urging the popularisation of the *Gītā* amongst all sections of Hindus. "The resolution also enjoins upon every Hindu to read the second chapter of the *Gītā*".[33] This is another indication of the growing authority of the

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[27]Quoted by Aurobindo Ghose, *op, cit.*, p. 516.

[28]A.C. Bhaktivedanta, *Bhagavadgītā As It Is*, Collier Books, New York, p. 18.

[29]Swami Chidbhavananda, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

[30]*Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā with the commentary, Bhavārthabodhini* (in Malayalam) Ramakrishna Ashram, Trichur, 1970, p. III (translation mine).

[31]Kunhan Menon, *Bhagavadgītā* (in Malayalam) National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1966, p. 18 (translation mine).

[32]Swami Sivananda, *The Bhagavadgītā*, Divine Life Society. Sivanandanagar, 1969, p. XV.

[33]G.V. Ketkar, "*Gītā-bīja* or the Main Portion of the *Gītā*" in *Studies in the Gītā*, p. 111.

Gītā and its acceptance as a "fuller scripture than the Upaniṣads".[34]

Focus of Current Indian Thought

In the interpretations of the schoolmen, as we have noted above, the *Bhagavadgītā* has been treated as one of the three foundational texts of the Vedanta philosophy. In modern times, especially with the publication of B.G. Tilak's *Gītā-Rahasya*, this ancient text has become the focus of Indian thought for many writers. The leaders of the Hindu renaissance re-discovered the *Gītā* not only as the kernel of Indian religion and philosophy, but also "as the political and social gospel of Hindu India".[35] In the *Gītā* they recognized a bold synthesis of philosophy and religion and thus reconciled the claims of the head and heart. In the words of Radhakrishnan, "The *Gītā* attempts a spiritual synthesis which could support life and conduct on the basis of the Upaniṣad truth, which it carries into the lifeblood of the Indian people".[36] This synthesis follows another synthesis in the Upaniṣads from which the *Gītā* draws heavily. According to Aurobindo, the *Gītā* starts from this Vedantic synthesis "and upon the basis of its essential ideas builds another harmony of the three great means and powers, Love, Knowledge and Works, through which the soul of man can directly approach and cast itself into the Eternal."[37] This seems to be the overwhelming reason for the shift of focus from the Upaniṣads to the *Gītā*. As Mahadev Desai puts it, "The *Gītā* performs the unique function of making what was an esoteric doctrine a living reality for the unlettered, the lowly and the lost, and present the highest form of practical religion to enable each and all to

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[34]D.S. Sarma, *Lectures on the Bhagavadgitā*, N. Subba Rao Pantulu, Rajamundry, 1937, p. 20.

[35]K.M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of New India*, Allen & Unwin London, 1963, p. 36.

[36]S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1951, Vol. I, p. 513.

[37]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 7 (Aurobindo Ghose seldom used his full name after he retired to Pondicherry and founded the Aurobindo Ashram. He was widely known as Aurobindo or Srī Aurobindo).

realize his or her purpose in life".[38]

In this synthesis, the *Gītā* brings together various systems and religious movements and paths to the final goal of man, namely,—liberation. While accepting the basic core of the Upaniṣadic philosophy, the author of the *Gītā*, renders validity to *Karmayoga* and *Bhaktiyoga*. In other words, the *Gītā* opens the portals of salvation without actually renouncing the world to practice austerities. As Radhakrishnan points out, the means of liberation shown by the Upaniṣads and by Buddhism were suitable only for the selected few, the sage and the ascetic. On the other hand, "The *Gītā* brings deliverance to those fettered by *Karma*, by opening to them the way of actions which helps them to attain freedom".[39] The starting point of the teachings of the *Gītā* is the ethical conflict Arjuna faced in the battlefield. From there the text moves on to other areas of spirituality with a synoptic insight or all-inclusive character. Aurobindo describes this movement of thought in the following words, "(The *Gītā*) goes boldly beyond all these conflicting positions, greatly daring, it justifies all life to the spirit as a significant manifestation of the one Divine Being and asserts the compatibility of a complete human action and a complete spiritual life lived in union with the Infinite, consonant with the highest self, expressive of the perfect Godhead".[40] It is the combination of the social duty, the following of one's *dharma*, with other spiritual-ethical ideals that made the *Gītā* the gospel of modern Hinduism. Mahadev Desai considers the Upaniṣads as the "New Testament" of Hinduism and the *Gītā* which stands in that tradition takes the place of the Gospels.[41]

There are many modern commentators of the *Gītā* who base their argument for the centrality of the *Gītā* in Indian thought on this synthesis of various systems of philosophy and religious ideals. The following statement of Jitendriya

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[38]Mahadev Desai, "My Submission", in *The Gītā According to Gandhi*, p. 19.

[39]S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Society*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1959, p. 74.

[40]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 519.

[41]Mahadev Desai, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Bannerjee is very representative. He says, "The *Gītā* has taken the essence of all these systems of philosophies and propounded its own system of emancipation from the miseries of life, giving a new orientation to the Vedic Philosophy and Sacrifices".[42] If one characterizes this line of argument it would run like this: Milk is readily available on the shelves of the super-market. (The *Gītā* is the milk of the Upaniṣads). Why then go to the farms to raise the cows and milk them? (Kṛṣṇa has milked the Upaniṣadic cows and given us the milk).

The orthodox pandits would strongly disagree with this approach to the *Gītā*. For them, the Vedas are of unequalled authority. A summary of the essence of the Vedas, even if the *Gītā* were that, is no equal of the original revelation.

But the voices in support of the excellence and even sufficiency of the *Gītā* keep growing in numbers. M. Rangacharya, without minimizing the authority of the Vedas, holds that in the *Gītā* we have the focus of Indian thought because it is "the greatest harmonizer of human civilization" in the true tradition of India and the wisdom of Kṛṣṇa imparted through its lines is "in full accord with the history of the development of human civilization and the growth of man's power of thought and moral capacity in all the varied aspects of his life at all times and all places."[43] In his view, sympathetic recognition and appreciation of all forms of religion and systems of thought are central to Indian tradition and the *Gītā* nobly upholds this.

D.D. Vadekar puts forward another interesting argument to establish the *Gītā* as the focus of Indian thought.[44] He grants that the *Gītā* "is the most representative synthesis of Indian philosophic thought" in the sense we discussed above. But, more importantly, it is a synthesis in the Hegelian sense.

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[42]Jitendriya Bannerjee, *The Gītā, The Song Supreme*, D.B. Taraporevala, Bombay, 1962, p. 7.

[43]Rangacharya, *The Philosophy of Hindu Conduct, being Lectures on the Bhagavadgītā*, Educational Publishing Co., Madras, 1957, Vol. I, pp. 6-7.

[44]D.D. Vadekar, *Bhagavad-Gītā, A Fresh Study*, Oriental Book Agency, Poona, 1928, *passim*.

He says, "...in the history of philosophic speculation in India, the Vedic period represents a *thesis*, and the Upaniṣadic period represents an *antithesis*, the *Gitā* presents a synthesis of the two".[45] In any interpretation of the *Gītā*, the philosophical context and background, as distinguished from the socio-political must be taken seriously, he urges. The historico-philosophical antecedents of the *Gītā* are undoubtedly the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. In the Vedic period, rituals dominated life. The desire to please and propitiate the deities found embodiment in the institution of *yajña* (sacrifice). The end of life was to secure happiness by seeking favour of the gods. According to Vadekar, "The substance of Vedic philosophy was a Theological Pluralism coupled with a practical Hedonism in ethics."[46]

The Upaniṣadic search for the one reality, Brahman, behind the phenomenal world and the final goal of realizing the identity of Brahman and Atman was a reaction against the Vedic pluralism; the antithesis. Renunciation of the world in the quest for the realization of the self is the highest good prescribed by the Upaniṣads. The *Gītā*, according to Vadekar, achieves a synthesis of the above two. It stands, "neither for the Vedic Pluralism nor the Upaniṣadic Singularism," but for the "Many which are the One and the One which appears as the Many".[47] The *Gītā* teaches that it is the "One Lord who presides after the evolution of this varigated world" and "from the one stem the many; and in the many there is but One".[48] The ethical ideal that the *Gītā* presents is union with this "One", through *jñāna* (knowledge) *bhakti* (devotion) or *karma* (works). In this ideal the self finds its consummation and fulfilment. Vadekar concludes that this "Synthesis of the *Gītā* represents a high watermark of Indian philosophical speculation on human life and its problems."[49]

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[45]D.D. Vadekar, "The Synthetic Character of the *Gitā* Teachings" in *Studies in the Gītā*, pp. 54-55.

[46]*Ibid.*, p. 56.

[47]*Ibid.*, p. 57.

[48]*loc. cit.*

[49]*Ibid.*, p. 58.

Modern Commentaries on the Gītā

The *Gītā* is one of the most widely commented scriptures of the world, in Indian as well as in non-Indian languages. There are innumerable commentaries *(bhāṣyas)* and notes (*tīkas*) on it in Sanskrit. The earliest *bhāṣya* which is extant and which exerts the greatest influence on the modern writers is the *bhāṣya* of Śankara (A.D. 788-820). In modern times, as Sanskrit has become the language of a scholarly few, the modern commentaries were written in regional languages or in English. Among the many commentaries in the regional languages only a few outstanding ones have been translated into English. This is very representative of the national movements themselves. Most of the movements, political as well as religious, were regional in origin. In the Twentieth Century as the nation was struggling for independence, the Indian National Congress, which led the movement, promised the people that Indian states shall be organised on the basis of language. So, as the movement for *swaraj,* self-rule, spread across the country during the early decades of this century, regional languages became the powerful media of nationalistic and political ideologies. This seems to be the reason for great national leaders like B.G. Tilak and M.K. Gandhi writing their commentaries on the *Gītā* in Marathi and Gujarati respectively. When we speak of modern commentaries on the *Gitā*, we do not, in view of the restriction stipulated by the title of the work, include commentaries by non-Indians, though there are some excellent commentaries from this source. These latter commentaries by the very nature of the case do not seek to go beyond the scholarly purpose of historical-critical research and interpretation. The modern Indian works on the *Gītā,* while taking these aspects seriously, have had something more in view. As K. Damodaran observes correctly: "...The *Gītā* became a powerful weapon in the hands of progressive national leaders like Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose and Mahatma Gandhi in their fight against British Imperialism".[50] Religious leaders who were

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[50]K. Damodaran, *Indian Thought, A Critical Survey*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1967, p. 193.

not actively involved in the political struggle, saw the *Gītā* as the text for religious revival and renaissance.

In the classical commentaries, beginning from Śankara, the motif was to fit this text into their system of thought, *Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita* or whatever may be the case. In the hands of the *Advaita* schoolmen who followed Śankara, the *Gītā* became a weapon of dialectical warfare. Nevertheless, these commentators interpreted the *Gītā* as *mokṣaśāstra* or science of salvation. To them, salvation meant realization of the self, or God-realization as a *Viśiṣṭādvaitin* would put it. When the Advaitins emphasized *gnosis* for this end, the *Viśiṣṭādvaitins* put the accent on *bhakti* (devotion). There was no movement of thought from this central theme of individual salvation towards *dharma*, the social duty of the individual.[51] B.G. Tilak was the first Indian writer on the *Gītā* who ventured to make a departure from the traditional pattern. As a leader of the *swaraj* (self-rule) movement he sought to stir the Indian intelligentsia and, through them the masses to restive action against the government. "The one scripture", observes D. MacKenzie Brown, "which he found eminently suited to this role was the *Bhagavad Gītā*....It was authoritative—recognized as an epitome of Brahmanic theory; it was popular—known to all sections of India; it stressed the doctrine of *Karma-yoga* (action)—insisting upon the warrior's duty to fight".[52] Tilak's commentary, *Śrimad Bhagavadgītā-Rahasya* or *Karma-yoga-śāstra*, published in 1915 opened a new path for many other national leaders to tread.

The commentaries that are published in English as well as Indian languages, roughly fall into two categories. First of all there are many commentaries, mostly by members of the various monastic orders, that are structured in the traditional pattern or leaning heavily on the traditional commentaries. What is new in these writings is, in the main, a response to

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[51]Here the term *dharma* is used in its limited meaning. We will delve into its wider meaning in the following chapter.

[52]D. MacKenzie Brown, "The Philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak", in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol, XVII, No. 2, (Feb. 1958) p. 197.

invading foreign religious ideologies. From the nature of this response, it was bound to become apologetic. However, in the hands of these leaders of religious thought, the *Gītā* became an instrument of religious revival. Secondly, there are commentaries and studies on the *Gītā* which are oriented towards national and ideological issues; social, political and religious. The purport of these new expositions was to forge a dynamic ideology that can face up to the challenges of the day. This attempt naturally led to the re-interpretation of certain concepts and to the re-shaping of the notions of *dharma* by appealing directly to *mokṣa* or the view of metaphysical Reality that is implied in them. The expositions of national leaders like B.G. Tilak, M.K. Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, K.M. Munshi, and to some extent S. Radhakrishnan fall under this category.[53] In our study of the patterns of Twentieth Century Indian Interpretations, we shall be concentrating on the latter.

In a study like this, there are many limitations. There are scores of modern commentaries on the *Gītā* in Indian languages, besides those many in English. It is practically impossible to deal however so inadequately with the major ones in each of the languages, as the scope is too large even if one possessed knowledge of all the pertinent languages. So, our approach has to be selective. Fortunately for us, all the commentaries which acquired a national reputation, have been translated into English. The principle of selection has to be applied to authors as well. We have given priority to the expositions of national leaders, who played a prominent role in the life of the nation in this century. Our need for limitation also applies to the period under study. It is limited to the Twentieth Century primarily because the new approach to this religious text was heralded only in 1915 with the publication of Tilak's *Gītā-Rahasya*, as we noted above.

Secondly, it is in this century that India witnessed and is still witnessing a national and ideological struggle of immense

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[53]Radhakrishnan's "Introductory Essay" and "Notes" to his translation of the *Gītā*, more or less follow the pattern of traditional *tīkas*.

proportions. It is also necessary to note what we are not attempting in this study. We shall not enter into a critical or historical study of the text, nor shall attempt to examine the relationship of the modern commentators to the classical ones. Such a study would no doubt be rewarding, but that will take us too far afield, and cannot feasibly become a thesis with some unity.

In the following pages an attempt is made to discuss the patterns of interpretations of the *Gītā* by some modern leaders of Indian thought. That would mean an examination of the modern Hindu religious consciousness as revealed in these commentaries. The question that we shall be asking continuously is this: How do the national leaders of India (monks and political leaders included) re-shape the age-old concepts and ideologies of this ancient text, to prepare India to face the problems of the present? Our search will touch social, political and religious realms of Indian life. This study of the patterns of these expositions of the *Gītā*, one hopes, would be as clear an index as any of the religious and spiritual aspirations of modern India.

CHAPTER II

The Gītā Doctrine of Dharma

The transcendental goal Hinduism places before its followers is *mukti*, the final release from the wheel of existence. The way to this ultimate spiritual end of life winds through the rough and complex terrain of social life. Thinkers from the Vedic times onwards took up the problems of this pilgrimage fervently and provided the devotees with elaborate guidelines. These guidelines for social living which is search of the final goal, formed a powerful social ideology that in course of time came to constitute *dharma*. The concept of *dharma* has two distinct aspects, namely individual or particular, and social or universal. In the *Gītā* there was a crystallization of the social ideologies that were in vogue at that time and the concept of *dharma* was interpreted at length in various discourses. The very context in which the discourses are given is the confusion of Arjuna about his *dharma*.[1] This is the individual aspect of the concept. The universal aspect is taken up most directly when Kṛṣṅa argues that the purpose of *avatāra* (incarnation) is to protect *dharma*[2]. Thus, the doctrine of *dharma*, as it has been developed in the *Gītā*, has a far-reaching significance for both individual and social life. This doctrine, as a powerful social ideology, played a crucial role in shaping the nature and destiny of Indian society.

The word *dharma* comprehends a wide range of meanings. In common parlance *dharma* has come to mean "the path leading to the next-world".[3] Here the path stands for one's religion, whether Vedic, Buddhist or Christian. Tilak rightly

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[1]*Pṛcchāmi tvāṁ dharmasammudhacetah* (*Bhagavadgıtā* II. 7).

[2]*Paritrāṇāya sādhūnaṁ vināśaya caduṣkṛtām dharma saṁsthāpanārthāya saṁbhavāmi yuge-yuge* (*Bhagavadgītā*, IV. 8).

[3]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

points out that this is a very restricted meaning of the word *dharma* and we have to take into account the wider connotation of the word in such expressions as *rājadharma* (the duty of kings) *prajādharma* (the duty of subjects), *jātidharma* (the duty pertaining to a caste) *kuladharma*, (the duty pertaining to a clan or family) and so on.[4] Kautilya, the great political theorist enumerates the four ideals of manhood (*puruṣārtha*), giving the first place to *dharma*, the other three being *artha*, (wealth) *kāma*, (desire) and *mokṣa*, (release). In Kautilya, as well as in Manu, the giver of Law Code *Manavadharma śāstra dharma* has acquired the wider meaning of morality and ethics. As we noted above, *dharma* was never independent of the final goal, *mukti* in any of the Hindu Scriptures.

In the Karnaparva of the *Mahābhārata* (*Ma. Bha. Karna* 69.59) the author puts the etymological derivation of the word *dharma* into the mouth of Kṛṣṇa himself. He says, "The word *dharma* comes from the root *dhr*, that is, to hold or uphold, and all human beings are held together by *dharma*. That by which the holding together (of all human beings) takes place is *dharma*."[5] It possibly also has the additional meaning of "to sustain",[6] from which itself it is clear that the social ideal that is enshrined in the concept of *dharma* holds the society together and sustains it by the moral law ensuing from it. Tilak draws the right conclusion about *dharma* as a moral law which maintains the society when he says, "When this *dharma* ceases to be observed, the binding ropes of society may be said to have become loose, and when these binding ropes are loosened, society will be in the same position as the planetary system consisting of the sun and planets would be in the sky without the binding force of gravitation or as a ship would be on the ocean without a rudder."[7]

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[4]*loc. cit.*

[5]Quoted by B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

[6]Swami Nikhilananda, *The Bhagavadgītā, Text with Commentary*, p. 12, Ramkrishna Vivekananda Centre, New York, 1944, p. 12.

[7]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

Social Significance of Svadharma

The teachings of the *Gītā* centre around the predicament in which Arjuna found himself in the battlefield, *Kurukṣetra*. Kṛṣṇa deals with this concrete human situation, namely Arjuna's doubts about the nature of his duty, his *kuladharma* as a Kṣatriya, rather than with any abstract problem. It is true that as the teachings develop the discourses lead Arjuna beyond the pale of the immediate problems to the wider problems of man, his relation to Ultimate Reality and to society at large. Having surveyed the lines of the battle, Arjuna was overcome with grief and pity. He thought that a fratricidal war would destroy all the values that had been cherished by him. The war would destroy the family and with that its age-long traditions and customs, with the disappearance of which the entire family passes into the grip of *adharma* or unrighteousness. With the rise of *adharma* the women in the family would become corrupt and when women abandon the path of virtue, there results a licentious intermixture of various social classes (*varṇas*).[8] So, Arjuna argued, he would rather let himself be killed in the battlefield, "unresisting and unarmed,"[9] than kill his kith and kin for the sake of the Kingdom. To this attitude of pity and faintheartedness, Kṛṣṇa replies that Arjuna must lead his army into the battle and carry out his *dharma* as a Kṣatriya. He urges Arjuna, "Futher, having regards for thine own duty, (*svadharma*) thou shouldst not falter; there exists no greater good for a Kṣatriya than battle enjoined by duty."[10] Though some of these verses in Kṛṣṇa's argument amount to insinuation,[11] the final imperative is to perform *dharma* through desireless action.[12] The all important question in approaching the *Gītā* doctrine of *dharma* is, "What world-view lies behind the divine command to carry out slaughter in a fratricidal war?" To comprehend

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[8]*Bhagavadgītā*, I. 39-41.

[9]*Ibid.*, I. 46.

[10]*Ibid.*, II. 31.

[11]Ibid., II. 31-38. Verse 37 offers the reward of the righteous war: heaven, if slain in the field of action; Kingdom, if the war is won.

[12]*Ibid.*, II. 47.

this enigma is to comprehend the concept of dharma in the *Gītā*.

Kṛṣṇa's command to Arjuna to perform his *svadharma* without any desire for fruits, has had more far reaching social significance than any other scriptural teaching in the socio-religious life of India. The statement in the fourth discourse, "The fourfold caste has been created by me according to the differentiation of *guṇa* and *karma*",[13] supports the view that *svadharma* specifically means caste duty. We will turn to the various interpretations of this verse later. If one takes the liberty to generalise, the whole burden of the *Gītā* is to drive home to Arjuna the nobility of *kuladharma*, caste duty. Tilak has no doubt about the implication of the teaching of the *Gītā* on *svadharma*. He writes "...in the *Bhagavadgītā* the word *dharma* has been used as meaning 'the duties of the four castes in this world', in the expression: *svadharman api cavekṣya*", where the Blessed Lord is telling Arjuna to fight, having regard to what his *dharma* is, and also later on the expression: *svadharme nidhanaṁ śreyah paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ* (*Bhagavadgītā* III.35) that is, it is better to die performing one's caste duties; following the duties enjoined on another caste is dangerous".[14] S.N. Dasgupta is in complete agreement with this understanding of the *Gītā* doctrine of *dharma*. He writes,

> The word '*dharma*' seems to be used in the *Gītā* primarily in the sense of an unalterable customary order of class-duties or caste-duties and the general approved course of conduct for the people and also in the sense of prescribed schemes of conduct. The meaning of *dharma* as 'old customary order' is probably the oldest meaning of the word. *Dharma* does not mean in the *Gītā* sacrifices (*yajña*) or external advantages...but the order of conventional practices involving specific caste-divisions and caste-duties.[15]

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[13]*cāturvarṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇakarma vibhāgaśaḥ* (*Bhagavadgītā* IV. 13).

[14]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[15]S.N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, University Press, Cambridge, 1961, Vol. II, p. 486.

Some commentators, while agreeing on the outward aspect of the fourfold division of society, put the stress on the inborn nature of the individual, which really decides his place in the society. Vinoba Bhave says that Arjuna was confused in the battlefield, because "he was at odds with his *svadharma*". Vinoba goes on to add, "But however unattractive a man's *svadharma* may be, he has to find fulfilment by persisting in it, because it is only through such persistence that growth is possible."[16] In Vinoba's opinion one's *svadharma* consists in following one's true vocation.[17] This vocation, according to the *Gitā* is the natural self-expression of man's character, *svabhāva*, which is produced by one or more of the three *guṇas*, *satva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Both Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo use the same phrase, 'law of action', to translate the idea of *svadharma*. Radhakrishnan writes, "His (Arjuna's) *svadharma* or law of action, requires him to engage in battle. Protection of right by the acceptance of battle, if necessary, is the social duty of the Kṣatriya, and not renunciation."[18] Aurobindo gives expression to the same idea in the following words, "At the very start it (the *Gītā*) has spoken of the nature, rule, and function of the Kṣatriya as Arjuna's own law of action, *svadharma*; it has proceeded to lay it down with a striking emphasis that one's own nature, rule, function should be observed and followed,—even if defective, it is better than the well performed rule of another's nature."[19] The four distinct orders of caste are orders of the active nature, or "four fundamental types of the soul in nature, *svabhāva*, and the work and function of each human being corresponds to his type of nature."[20] This 'nature' of a person is shaped according to the depth of his participation in one of the *guṇas* mentioned above.

The *Gītā* accepts the Samkhya doctrine of the three essential qualities or modes of *prakṛti*, namely, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The fourteenth discourse concentrates on these quali-

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[16]Vinoba Bhave, *op. cit.*, p. 7-8.
[17]*Ibid.*, p. 9.
[18]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 112.
[19]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 466.
[20]*Ibid.*, p. 467.

ties or *guṇas*. These *guṇas*, according to the *Gītā* are "sprung from *prakṛti*"[21] and they guide the destiny of an individual. Among these *guṇas*, *sattva* is the mode of pairs, "light-giving and healing".[22] *Rajas* is the mode of passion, "the source of thirst and attachment" and it keeps a man bound with the bond of action.[23] *Tamas* is the source of ignorance and inertia; "it keeps him bound with heedless sloth and slumber."[24] No man is exclusively the product of one of these *guṇas*. Gandhi sees in this mixture of *guṇas*, the making of human persons, the road to perfection, "the ascent of man". He writes, "We have each of us to rise to a state in which we are governed predominantly by the *sattva* principle, until at last we rise beyond the three and are 'Perfect Man".[25] The great discipline given by the *Gīṭā* does not stop with the conquering of the lower *guṇas*, *rajas* and *tamas*, but by transcending all the three *guṇas*. The *Gītā* says, "The Vedas have as their domain the three *guṇas*, but do thou become free from these *guṇas*, (*nistraiguṇya*) O Arjuna. Free thyself from the pairs of opposites, abide in eternal truth (*nityasattvastha*), not caring for acquisition and preservation, and be possessed of the self."[26]

The ability to transcend the *guṇas*, to become a *triguṇatita*, is the mark of the liberated self. According to Vinoba Bhave, we can completely transcend the two lower modes. But when it comes to *sattva*, we should discipline our souls in such a way that it becomes part of our nature. He writes, "When we are absorbed in *svadharma*, *rajas* loses its glamour; for then the mind is one-pointed."[27] In the case of *sattva*, it should pervade every pore of our beings. "When *sattva* becomes so much our nature, we should cease to be proud of it. This is the way to make *sattva* harmless, to

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[21] *Bhagavadgītā*, XIV. 5.
[22] *Ibid.*, XIV. 6.
[23] *Ibid.*, XIV. 7.
[24] *Ibid.*, XIV. 8.
[25] M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, or *The Gītā According to Gandhi*, p. 328.
[26] *Bhagavadgītā*, II. 45.
[27] *Vinoba Bhave*, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

achieve victory, over it"[28] Vinoba concedes that, "so long as we have a body, we have to take our stand on something."[29]

The above interpretation of *sattva* seems to arise from the expression, *nityasattvastha*, of II.45 quoted above. In this Vinoba is only following the classical commentators, Śankara and Ramānuja. They took *nityasattva* to mean *sattvaguṇa*. Radhakrishnan understands the expression not as "the mode of *sattva* which Arjuna is asked to go beyond, but [is] eternal truth."[30] B.S. Sukthankar, translator of *Gītā-Rahasya* also takes this meaning, that is eternal truth. In a footnote he says, "As *sattva* is one of the three constituents, and as the Blessed Lord has just asked Arjuna to be 'beyond the three constituents', '*nityasattvastha*, cannot be understood as referring to the *sattva* constituent."[31] Since the Fourteenth discourse clearly says that *sattva* binds man to his body by conscious happiness and knowledge, liberation, if it is to be real, must transcend even the highest mode of the three constituents whose interplay accounts for the diversity of human *svabhāva* and *dharma*. Mahadev Desai, the translator and commentator of *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, sees this injunction in the *Gītā* and writes, "He who has seen the play and interplays of the *guṇas* and who can detach himself from them, he who can isolate himself from them and realize the unity at the basis of this diversity is a seer—a *tattvavid* who has known the truth of things, he is free, his action does not bind him, his action is no action."[32]

When the *guṇas* are taken as the constitutive stuff of man, the stuff that determines the *svabhāva* and thereby the *svadharma* of man, the *Gītā* is borrowing the determinism of the Sāṁkhya philosophy. In Aurobindo's view, only the ego-self, the lower self, is under the power of this determinism. He writes, "It is really the ego which is subject to Nature,

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[28]*Ibid.*, p. 228.

[29]*Ibid.*, p. 226.

[30]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 118.

[31]B.G. Tilak. *op. cit.*, p. 889 (footnote).

[32]Mahadev Desai, "My Submission", in *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 31.

inevitably, because it is itself part of the Nature, one functioning of his machinery..And so too what we think of ordinarily as the soul is really the natural personality, not the true person, the *Purusha,* but the desire-soul in us which is a reflection of the consciousness of the *Purusha* in the workings of the *Prakṛiti.*"[33] But when the individual self is "one with the *Ishvara*, the master of our nature"[34] man is able to use nature without subjection to the chain of *karma*, for the purpose of the divine will. In the words of Aurobindo, "freedom, the highest self-mastery begins when above the natural self we see and hold the supreme Self of which the ego is an obstructing veil and a blinding shadow."[35] In the light of this freedom, the modes of nature from "a principle and will of our becoming". The *guṇas* become "the law of action determined by this *svabhāva* (the principal of our becoming), is our right law of self-shaping, function, working our *svadharma*".[36] We will have to look into the various aspects of the concept of *svadharma* to see whether it really is the "right law of self-shaping,"

Dharma and Mukti: Some Views

The final goal of all spiritual striving is release or *mukti* from the cycle of life and death. This position of the *Gītā* is in line with the general current of Indian philosophical thought. But, this final goal is beyond logical proof. It transcends the realm of mind and language.[37] It has been aptly said that "one who claims to fully know it and starts giving a full description of it does not know it in reality."[38] Therefore, it is not surprising that the *Gītā* does not give a discourse on the nature of release or the released. However, we have in the *Gītā* clear references to the state of the final goal

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[33]Aurobindo Ghose *op. cit.*, p. 195.

[34]*Ibid.*, p. 192, *Bhagavadgītā*, II.51 speaks of this unity with the Divine and the freedom from the bonds of birth.

[35]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

[36]*Ibid.*, p. 476.

[37]*Yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha (Taittiryopaniṣad).*

[38]G.W. Kaveeshwar, *The Ethics of the Gītā*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971, p. 198.

in general terms. It (*mukti*) is spoken of as *brahmasthiti*[39] (life eternal, as Radhakrishnan has it), "state of immortality,"[40] "infinite eternal bliss"[41] absence of return, that is final liberation from births and deaths,[42] "crossing of the ocean of *māyā*,[43] and so on. This same state is also described in clearer Advaitic terms as "the union of the individual soul with the Universal Being",[44] or of the "realization of the spiritual identity of all beings."[45] The classical commentators, because of their preoccupation with the idea of *mukti*, *mokṣa*, saw the *Gītā* primarily as a text which teaches *mokṣaśāstra*, (science of release.). In this undue concern for the final end of life or other worldliness as we may be tempted to call it, they failed to see the relation between the final goal and the steps which lead to it. In other words, only the "God-ward" aspect of the teachings of the *Gītā* was discovered and interpreted by the earlier commentators. It was left to the modern interpreter to delve into the this-worldly aspect and bring out its significance.

Mukti is not something to be discovered a new by the mind. It is an intuitive grasping of the identity of the individual soul with the Universal Being. Several steps, such as the control of the senses, renunciation of the fruit of action, pursuit of the good of all, are mentioned as the steps leading to the final goal. But, all these are contained in the concept of *svadharma*. Though the liberated soul is no more under the obligation to perform his *dharma*, "There is such a thing as desireless action which he undertakes for the walfare of the world.[46] The *Gītā* injunction to perform one's *dharma*, the work that has to be done, without attachment, is to be understood in this light. "Man attains the highest by doing work without attachment".[47] It is to be admitted that the *Gītā* does

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[39]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, II. 72, IV. 31, V. 6, 19. 20.
[40]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, II. 15, XIII. 12, XI. 20, 27.
[41]Cf. *Bhagavadgítā*, V. 21, VI. 27, 28, XIV. 27.
[42]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, II. 51, V 17, XII 7, XII. 23, XIV. 20.
[43]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, VII. 14.
[44]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, VI. 31, VII. 18, 19, XI. 54, 55, XII. 4, 8, etc.
[45]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, IV. 35, VI. 29.
[46]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 138.
[47]*Bhagavadgītā*, III. 19.

not clearly spell out the relation between the final end of life, *mukti*, and the *dharma* which a man has to perform in this world. This ambiguity provides the commentators with enough room to overlook *dharma* as a means which leads to *mukti*. Śanskara's interpretation of the above verse is a clear example of this. He holds that the performance of duties only helps us to attain purity of mind which leads to salvation. It takes us to perfection indirectly through the attainment of purity of mind.[48]

Aurobindo's position regarding *dharma* and its relation to final release is closer to Śankara's, though in many other aspects he radically differs from the *ācārya*. Aurobindo writes, "To follow the law of its being, *svadharma*, to develop the idea in its being, *svabhāva*, is its ground and safety, its right walk and procedure."[49] Through this path of *svadharma*, the soul purifies itself by "the pursuit of the impulse of works and service rightly done develops knowledge, increases power, trains closeness of balance of mutuality and skill and order of relation."[50] Aurobindo asserts that following *svadharma* is the surest way: "to make our whole life a sacrifice of works to the Highest is to prepare ourselves to become one with him in all our will and substance and nature".[51] It is to be noted that while Śankara sees *dharma* as purifying the mind, Aurobindo understands its function as preparing us for the final end, that is union with the Universal Being.

In Gandhi's thinking, *mukti* is inseparably related to one's *dharma*. He has no doubt that "self-realization is the subject of the *Gītā*, as it is the object of all scriptures", and *Gītā* teaches "the most excellent way to attain self-realization".[52] He asserts that one can attain liberation through *dharma* by plunging oneself deep into it but without being attached. *Dharma* has to be performed for its own sake, without any desire whatsoever for a certain result of fruit or return. Such performance of *dharma* leads to knowledge which in turn

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[48]Sankara's *Commentary on the Bhagavadgītā*, III. 19.
[49]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 477.
[50]*Ibid.*, p. 480.
[51]*Ibid.*, p. 481.
[52]M.K. Gandhi, *op. cit.*, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 129.

brings release. In his view, *dharma* is by no means limited to the particular duties of caste at all. All strivings toward salvation, which is "perfect peace",[53] whether it be through, devotion, renunciation of the fruits of action, or thirst for the knowledge of God, are different faces of the *dharma*. The final goal, according to him is not something apart from the means. "In other words, if the means and end are not identical, they are almost so."[54]

Tilak begins his analysis of the relation between *dharma* and release by accepting the four goals (*puruṣārthas*) of life laid down by Indian philosophers. He holds that the principal duty of man "is to discern the essential principle underlying the Body and the Cosmos; and this is what is known as 'Release' in religion."[55] The "usual activities of the visible world" consist of *dharma* (duty) *artha* (wealth) and *kāma* (desire). Release (*mokṣa*) is the transcendental goal of life. Tilak interprets *dharma* in this fourfold goal, as worldly, social and moral duty. He pertinently raises the question, whether these four ends of life (*puruṣarthas*) "are or are not mutually promotive?"[56] In his opinion, the verbal differences about the doctrine that there is no release unless a man has acquired the knowledge of that fundamental principle "which pervades the body and the cosmos"[57] is not fundamental. He is categorical in denying that the *Gītā* religion teaches only the way of knowledge for salvation. The *Gītā* clearly accepts the doctrine that if one has to acquire the two parts of the goal, namely 'wealth' and 'desire', that has to be done according to the *dharma* (moral principles). The only question which remains to be sorted out is "the mutual relationship between *dharma* and release".[58] All shades of opinion accept the view that release can be achieved only through the purification of mind by means of *dharma*. "Therefore, even considering the matter from the point of view of Release, it

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[53]*Ibid.*, p. 130.
[54]*Ibid.*, p. 130.
[55]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 657.
[56]*loc. cit.*
[57]*Ibid.*, p. 658.
[58]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 658.

follows that worldly life has got to be gone through consistently with '*dharma*' in the period of time before purification of the mind."[59] Tilak argues that if a man is not faithful to his *dharma* in discharging his worldly responsibilities, how can he be successful in realizing the final goal? In his thinking, the path of knowledge *(jñānamārga)* which advocates the highest importance to spiritual knowledge after the abandonment of worldly affairs is not in agreement with the teachings of the *Gītā*. He writes,

> But the *Gītā* religion says to the contrary that not only is *dharma* necessary for the purification of the mind, but it is necessary to continue doing the same actions merely as duties, and as part of one's religion, and desirelessly, and for the good of others, even afterwards, that is, after the purification of the mind, although worldly activities in the shape of enjoyment of objects of pleasure may become unnecessary for one's own benefit.[60]

We have seen above that *dharma*, performed in the spirit in which the *Gītā* presents it, leads to the final goal of life. The ends of life, whether related to this world or the next, are mutually encompassing; one gives direction and fulfilment to the other. The final release which is totally free from *dharma* is shallow, in the view of most of the modern commentators of the *Gītā*. Spiritual freedom is by no means inconsistent with duty.[61] The liberated are to follow their *dharma*, so long as they are in the world. They have to do the works for the welfare of the world.[62] This leads us to the social implications of *dharma*.

Dharma the Highest Social Goal

Arjuna has been enjoined to fight heroically because it is his *dharma* as a Kṣatriya to maintain the stability of the social order and the faith of men in that order. The command to

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[59]*loc. cit.*
[60]*Ibid.*, p. 659.
[61]Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 73.
[62]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, III. 20.

perform one's *dharma* "with a view to the maintenance of the world", goes beyond the purview of *dharma* as *kula-dharma*, clan-duty. Though the concept of *dharma* always had the individual and the social aspect, the accent was mainly on the former in the salvation oriented interpretations of the *Gītā*. The social aspect of *dharma* goes beyond the caste duty performed for its own sake. Arjuna has to fight, not only to maintain his good name as a soldier,[63] but to maintain the order of the world[64] and to be an example to those who are ignorant of the meaning of *dharma*.[65]

In verse 20 of chapter III, the purpose of action or duty has been designated as *lokasaṁgraha*. This word is pregnant with the social connotations of the *Gītā* concept of *dharma*. It has been translated as 'maintenance of the world' (Radhakrishnan) 'universal welfare' (Tilak), 'guidance and control of the world' (Rangacharya), 'guidance of men' (Swami Chidbhavananda), etc. Radhakrishnan says that the word stands for the unity of the world and the interconnectedness of society.[66] Rangacharya summarizes the different interpretations of the word as follows: "This word has been somewhat variously interpreted to mean the accomplishment of the good of the world so as to prevent it from going astray, the inducement offered to the world so as to make it adopt the life which we consider to be good for it".[67] This, in Rangacharya's thinking is 'guidance and control of the world'. Referring to verse 25, which also speaks of the welfare of humanity, he says, "The expression *lokasaṁgraha* really means taking the world along with one".[68] Tilak analyses the word and the concept at greater length. To him, the idea of *dharma* which is related to the universal welfare, is a central theme of the *Gītā*, which gives life and blood to his doctrine of the pre-eminence of *Karmayoga*. He writes, "The word *loka* in the phrase '*lokasaṁgraha*' has a compre-

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[63]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, II. 34.
[64]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, III. 20.
[65]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, III. 26.
[66]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 139.
[67]M. Rangacharya, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 207.
[68]*Ibid.*, p. 207.

hensive meaning, and includes the putting, not only of mankind, but the entire world, on a proper path, and making a '*saṁgraha*' of it, that is maintaining, feeding, protecting and defending it in a proper way, without allowing it to be destroyed".[69] This comprehensive meaning of *lokasaṁgraha* provides us with a new and dynamic social content for *dharma* itself. It is wrong to read that the role of the 'world-maintenance' is only for the enlightened people like King Janaka of the *Ramayana*. It is a social doctrine with wider implications for every one who seeks the noble ends of life. But, one has to note that there are some commentators, who think that the special role of serving and guiding the society is for the spiritually enlightened. Swami Chidbhavananda, for example, maintains that the ignorant cannot guide the society any more than the blind lead the blind. Therefore, he holds, "The enlightened are the best servants of the society. The nature of *karma* is also very well known to them. Efficient work on right can be turned out by them."[70] This argument does not hold water, in the light of the context of the *Gītā*. Arjuna, to whom the *Gītā* is addressed, was not an enlightened individual when he was asked to fight the battle for the welfare of the world. It would be more correct to say that both the liberated and the non-liberated have to be in the business of *lokasaṁgraha*. The "liberated man still works for the right government and leading on the peoples in these worlds, *lokasaṁgraha* [for] he is the friend of all existence."[71] For the non-liberated, it is the means which leads him to fulfilment of life. King Janaka attained to perfection," by equal and desireless works done as a sacrifice, without the least egoistic aim or attachment."[72]

Dharma, as we have noted above, not only leads a man to self-purification, but also enables him to be an instrument in serving and guiding the world. Radhakrishnan urges, "The emphasis of the *Gītā* on *lokasaṁgraha*, world-solidarity,

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[69]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 927.
[70]Swami Chidbhavananda, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 241.
[71]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 217.
[72]*Ibid.*, p. 122.

requires us to change the whole pattern of our life,"[73] The social aspect of *dharma*, requires us to lay stress on human brotherhood, as Radhakrishnan sees it. It is on the basis of this understanding that he calls *karma marga*, "the path of service" which leads to *mokṣa*.[74] But, for Radhakrishnan, *lokasaṁgraha* does not stop with the idea of welfare of the society or human brotherhood. He believes that *lokasaṁgraha* implies the spiritualisation of society and the control of social action by the principles of religious ethics. He writes perhaps in a romantic vein, "In an age of hope and energy we emphasize active service in the world and the saving of civilization". It is a matter of debate whether the *Gītā* agrees with him when he goes on to affirm with Boethius that "he will never go to heaven who is content to go alone".[75] P.N. Srinivasachari agrees with Radhakrishnan. He writes, "The *summum bonum* of life is not merely the attainment of spirituality and *mukti* for oneself, but service to all *jīva*s so that they may also enjoy the bliss of divine life."[76] One has to note, that the important question in this context is, whether the *Gitā* supports this type of universalism and *sarva mukti*, salvation of all. If it does, modern Indian commentators do not bring it out clearly.

It is Tilak, more than any one else, who saw in the idea of *lokasaṁgraha*, seeds of a dynamic social philosophy. He maintains that individualism defeats the very purpose and plan of human life and should be replaced by the ideal of corporate life and cooperative effort. Those who give up their social *dharma*, for the sake of seclusion and contemplative life, according to Tilak, violate the rules of cosmic ethics. In his view, *lokasaṁgraha* means, "binding men together, and protecting, maintaining and regulating them in such a way that they might acquire that strength which results from mutual co-operation, thereby putting them on the path of

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[73]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 71.

[74]S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 566.

[75]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 140.

[76]P.N. Srinivasachari, *The Ethical Philosophy of the Gītā*, Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 1966, p. 136.

acquiring merit while maintaining their good condition."[77] He points out that Manu has used the word in the same sense, that is, welfare of the nation. Even though *lokasaṁgraha* has this primary meaning of welfare of man it really goes beyond the world of men. There are other *lokas* (worlds) such as *pitṛloka, devaloka*, etc. These worlds are also to be maintained properly. So, Tilak thinks that *lokasaṁgraha* has the wider meaning of maintaining various worlds *lokasaṁgraha=lokānām saṁgrahaḥ*).) The maintenance of these several worlds, according to the *Gītā*, "are mutually beneficial, to the gods, as well as men".[78] In other words, the concept embraces cosmic solidarity and welfare.

Tilak has nothing to do with the commentators who interpret the concept of *lokasaṁgraha* half-heartedly, and who thereby imply that the *Jñānins* are not bound to act for the welfare of the world. He points out that when a man realizes his identity, he is one with the universe. "I am in all created beings and all created beings are in me." This means that the *Jñāni* is not free from his *dharma* to the rest of the world. He quotes a very telling passage from the *Yoga-Vasiṣṭha*: "So long as the duty of looking after other people (that is, *lokasaṁgraha*) remains to howsoever small an extent, it cannot be said that the state of the person, who has attained *Yoga*, has become free from blame."[79] It is pure selfishness, as Tilak sees it, for a man to be "engrossed in the happiness of meditation", while there are millions of people to whom he is bound by an inseparable bond, the bond of the all pervading self. Besides, Tilak maintains, it is natural that noble sentiments of sympathy towards all other beings must arise in the minds of people who know that "there is only one Atman in all created beings and the trend of his mind must naturally be towards universal welfare."[80]

The division of society into four castes, as Tilak sees it, is a divine plan for the maintenance of the world. Every one in society, whether a Brahmin or Śudra, has one's part to play

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[77]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 456.
[78]*Ibid*, p. 457.
[79]*Ibid.*, p. 460.
[80]*Ibid.*, p. 461.

in the protection of the society. "Therefore", Tilak concludes, "I have to mention here emphatically, that *lokasaṁgraha* according to the *Gītā* means, giving to other people a living example of how one can perform desirelessly all the various activities, which are allotted to one, according to the arrangement of castes."[81] The *dharma* of every individual, whatever may be his social position has to be performed with a sense of dedication, without any hope for reward. The universal welfare depends on each member of the society and his *dharma* becoming the worship of the Supreme Lord when he has the welfare of others in mind. All actions, when performed in this spirit, "are essentially the same, that the fault if any, lies in the reason of the doer, and not in the action (*karma*) and that when a man performs all his actions after establishing his reason, he thereby only performs the worship of the *Paramesvara*, and, not having committed any sin, ultimately attains release."[82] He warns against entertaining high hopes about the results of one's service to the society. Hope for the fruit may lead to unhappiness. "You must perform action, keeping in sight (*saṁpaśyan*) public welfare, instead of saying that '*lokasaṁgrahartha*' means, for obtaining fruits in the shape of public welfare."[83] Tilak, it would seem, is at pains to limit his interpretation of *dharma* and service to the teachings of the scriptures, even though he tries his best to bring out the meaning of scriptural injunctions. He does not dare to oppose established conventions. This makes him say, "The chief conclusion of the ethics of the *Gītā* is, that one must perform all one's duties according to the *Śāstras*, desirelessly and by self-identification, and this applies equally well to all persons in all countries."[84] In other words, Tilak's otherwise radical approach has been restrained by his allegiance to the scriptures. This raises the important question, which Kaveeshwar very pertinently asks, "If one feels it imperative to oppose a prevalent custom in the

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[81] *Ibid.*, p. 462.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 490.
[83] *Ibid.*, p. 466.
[84] *Ibid.*, p. 696.

interest of the wider social good itself, what guiding principle should he adopt in such a crisis?[85] Tilak, in a way, evades this question.

We see in Aurobindo a totally different approach to the concept of *dharma* as service or universal welfare, as Tilak interprets it. To Aurobindo, the *Gītā* does not teach human action, but divine action. He completely rejects "the ideal of disinterested performance of social duties", and says that the modern ideal of social service is foreign to the *Gītā*. He writes, "...not the performance of social duties, but the abandonment of all other standards of duty or conduct for a selfless performance of the divine will working through our nature; not social service, but the action of the Best, the God possessed, the Mastermen, done impersonally for the sake of the world and as a sacrifice to Him who stands behind man and Nature."[86] Aurobindo agrees that works have to be done "with the same desirelessness after the liberation and perfection", as did the great *Karmayogis* like Janaka. But he opposes all kinds of pragmatic tendencies "concerned much more with the present affairs of the world than with any high and far-off spiritual"[87] possibilities. He rejects any idea of "a large moral and intellectual altruism" in the concept of *lokasaṁgraha* as taught by the *Gītā*, and states that what the *Gītā* means is "a spiritual unity with God and with this world of beings who dwell in him and in whom he dwells".[88] He is inclined to see patriotism, cosmopolitanism, service of society and other noble expressions of the human soul which may fall under the category of 'universal welfare' as "admirable aids towards our escape from our primary condition of individual, family, social, national egoism into a secondary stage". where the individual realizes his oneness with other beings. But, this is a level, where man cannot entirely do it the perfect way, "the way of the integral truth of his being." Aurobindo asserts, "The thought of the *Gītā* reaches beyond to a tertiary condition of our developing self-consciousness

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[85]G.W. Kaveeshwar, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
[86]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
[87]*Ibid.*, p. 123.
[88]*loc. cit.*

towards which the secondary is only a partial stage of advance."[89]

Aurobindo puts the welfare of the individual—that is his integral development—above the welfare of the society. He takes into task the Indian social tendency to subordinate the individual to the claims of the society. (It is very doubtful, whether such a tendency existed at all, especially in the early twenties of this century when he wrote his *Essays on the Gītā*.) He is one with the Indian religious thought and spiritual seeking which have been always loftily individualistic in their aims. According to Aurobindo the goal set by the Indian religious thought the *Gītā* being the embodiment of that for the individual "was to exceed himself,...not by losing all his personal aims in the aims of an organised human society, but by enlarging, heightening, aggrandising himself into the consciousness of the Godhead."[90] From this he moves on to his theory of the superman, which according to many critics, is a notion difficult to trace in the Indian scriptures or philosophical thought for that matter. He claims, "The rule given here by the *Gītā* is the rule for the master-man, the superman, the divinised human being, the Best,... the man whose personality has been offered up into the being, nature and consciousness of the transcendent and universal Divinity and by the loss of the smaller self has found its greater self, and has been divinised."[91] We can appreciate this position only in the light of Aurobindo's philosophy. The evolutionary movement of nature can be hastened by the dynamic will of man, according to him. "His superman", as Sukumar Azhikode observes, "and supermanhood are the inevitable destiny of man; not an empty dream. It is not to be received as a gift of the evolutionary process in the future, but to be attained by the *yogi*, by his will."[92] However, it is to be noted that in the scheme of Aurobindo, *lokasaṁgraha*

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[89]*loc. cit.*

[90]*Ibid.*, p. 124.

[91]*loc. cit.*,

[92]Sukumar Azhikode, "Aravindante Yogadarsanam" (in Malayalam) in *The Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Calicut, Vol. L. No, 38, (translation mine).

has a place, when it forms part of the striving of the human soul towards perfection. When the idea of service fits into that wider scheme, it becomes a divine goal. This is to say that universal welfare has no value and meaning apart from the integral experience of oneness with the universal Divinity. He writes, "To act for the *lokasaṁgraha*, impersonally for the keeping and leading of the peoples on the path of the divine goal, is a rule which rises necessarily from the oneness of the soul with the Divine, the Universal Being, since that is the whole sense and drift of the universal action."[93]

Varnāśrama Dharma and the Caste System Today

The *Gītā* doctrine of *dharma*, as we have seen above, is inseparably linked with the fourfold social order. In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa himself claims to be the creator of this division. "The fourfold order was created by Me according to the divisions of quality and work. Though I am its creator, know me to be incapable of action or change."[94] This verse has been used by the protagonists of the caste system to justify the division of society. Most of the modern commentators try to explain away the system, laying the stress on the quality of men, that is, their ability in relation to a certain work. However, there are a few who dare to question the assumptions behind this kind of compartmentalization of society and placing certain groups of people at the apex of the hierarchy with "noble" jobs to do and certain others at the lower end to perform menial functions to keep the society going. On the other hand some of the commentators who approach the *Gītā* primarily as their spiritual guide, see great value even in this division of society and try to seek what is good in it while dissociating the "atomic conception of society" from the *cāturvarṇa* as enunciated by this verse.

The above mentioned verse relates clearly to the organization of society on the basis of caste status. It is apparent that the *Gītā* accepts the legal ritualism of Vedic Brahmanism, which took the caste structure of society for granted. The

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[93]Aurobindo Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

[94]*Bhagavadgītā*, IV. 13.

author of the *Gītā* is only strengthening the system in vogue by ascribing divine origin to it. Rangacharya sees two levels in the development of the system. He says that the word *varṇa* denotes two different kinds of caste, namely, caste by birth and by quality. "The former of these two kinds of caste is sometimes spoken of in Sanskrit as *janma-krita varṇa* and the latter as *guṇa-krita varṇa.*"[95] He argues that it was perfectly natural in the development of society for caste by birth to come into vogue. Later, with the advancement of philosophy, politics or religion, the division of society on the basis of natural aptitudes and qualities replaces the status by birth. Rangacharya points out this gradual change that has taken place between the time of the *Manu-Smṛti,* and the *Mahābhārata.* He writes, "According to *Manu-Smṛti,* he who is born a Brahmin is entitled to perform certain functions in society; while according to the *Bhagavadgītā,* he who is in possession of certain specified qualites, is entitled to be a Brahmin."[96] He, like many other commentators, argue that the caste status of an individual is largely determined by the qualities, *guṇas,* which make him. This would boil down in effect to saying that a Brahmin has more *satva* in his makeup and a Śūdra has more *tamas.* But, he admits that this theory does not actually correspond to the caste structures as they exist in India today.

Though Rangacharya upholds caste by quality in the light of the teachings of the *Gītā,* he maintains that one of the important roles of the system is to prevent the mixing up of castes, *varṇa-samskara,* which is very dangerous to society. He thinks that inter-caste (i.e. caste by birth) marriages will destroy "the inherited capacity for moral and intellectual culture."[97] He is quick to point out that the "compartments" thus created by the prohibition of inter-caste marriages are all equal. Vedanta does not recognize the superiority of the Brahmin compartment above that of the Śūdra.[98] He admits that the inequality, which is current in practice on the basis

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[95]M. Rangacharya, *op. cit.,* Vol. I, p. 357.
[96]*Ibid.,* p. 363.
[97]*loc. cit.*
[98]*Ibid.,* p. 365.

of the birth of a man, takes time to be corrected by the doctrine of equality sanctioned by the Vedanta. But he does not see the contradiction in rejecting inter-caste marriages. He says that the necessity of this "prohibition is due to the hetrogeneous composition of the social life", which the community has to regulate with a view to peaceful progress. He writes, "The religion of the Hindus recognises fully in theory the spiritual equality and brotherhood of man in respect of all other relations in life than the one of marriage."[99] Rangacharya holds on to this position in the light of his conviction: "Anything like a too rapid displacement of the unwanted old order is almost, if indeed not quite, impossible, and it is moreover utterly undesirable."[100]

Tilak, naturally in line with his *karmayogaśāstra*, maintains that the "ancient *ṛṣis* created the institution of four castes, which was in the nature of a division of labour, in order that all the affairs of society should go on without a hitch, and that society should be protected and maintained on all sides, without any particular person or group of persons having to bear all the burdens".[101] He clearly relates this division of labour to the concept of *lokasaṁgraha* as we have noted above. He does not doubt that the *Gītā* supports Manu on the question of caste. He also argues that the system helps to develop the inherent qualities of the individual. If he takes any other business, there is a chance of harm being done to the society. Tilak regards the *adhikara* of *Vedanta Sūtras* III, iii, 32,[102] as "this diverse capacity which exists in every person, consistently with the god-given, inherent, natural characteristics" and it has to be used for the welfare of the society. This is not a principle only for those who are supposedly superior, but also for everybody. Society functions on the basis of cooperation between castes. "Just as extremely small wheels are necessary", he observes, "along with large wheels in order that any machine should work

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[99]*Ibid.*, p. 364.

[100]*Ibid.*, p. 356.

[101]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[102]*yāvad adhikāram avasthitir ādhikāriṇaṁ (Vedanta Sūtras*, III, iii, 32).

properly"[103], in like manner common man coordinates his duty with the saints for the sake of the society.

Tilak rejects the contention that the *Gītā* ethics is based on the arrangement of four castes. The division of people on the basis of their qualities "was the most simple and natural illustration, which applied to the circumstances of that particular age"[104] and that this arrangement is not universal by any means. What is the kernel of the teaching: it would be performance of the duty assigned to an individual according to the arrangement of the society, with courage and desirelessness, for the public good. At the same time, taking up the *dharma* of some one else, "on some pretext or other is wrong from the point of view of Morality, as also from the point of view of public good".[105] At times, it seems that Tilak tends towards a deterministic acceptance of the given lot of the individual and the full development of the individual as a human person is subordinated to the established social orders, which have the sanction of the scriptures.

Radhakrishnan looks at the fourfold division of society in the context of *dharma*, not apart from it. "The traditional rules of *dharma* are to be followed, because He established them and He upholds the moral order."[106] But he is opposed to the division of society on the basis of one's birth. "The *varṇa* or the order to which we belong is independent of sex, birth or breeding. A class determined by temperament and vocation is not a caste determined by birth and heredity."[107] He upholds the *Gītā* teaching, which is more or less a division according to quality. This division, according to Radhakrishnan, is designed for human evolution. While admitting that the division of the society into castes and sub-castes created the present morbid condition of India, he maintains that functional groupings will never be out of date. On the question of inter-caste marriages he agrees with Rangacharya. Says he, "...as for marriages they will happen among those

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[103]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 464.
[104]*Ibid.*, p. 697.
[105]*loc. cit.*
[106]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 75.
[107]*Ibid.*, p. 161.

who belong to more or less same stage of cultural development." He cites a verse from *Mahābhārata* in support of his position: "...conduct is the only determining feature of caste according to the sages."[108] This conduct, *svabhāva*, guides us in the pursuit of our *dharma* and "then God would express Himself in the free volitions of human beings."[109] At the same time he points out that the *Gītā* "cannot be used to support the existing social order with its rigidity and confusion".[110]

There appear to be contradictory ideas at play in Radhakrishnan's interpretation of *cāturvarṇa*. He is at once a thinker who is exposed to its evil and one who is bound by the philosophy which upholds the system. He refers to an ancient verse to establish equality of all castes: "the Brahmin and the outcaste are blood brothers".[111] At the same time he speaks of cultural barriers between castes. Again, he gives, great importance to *svadharma*, which is actually caste *dharma*, when it comes to practical matters. If we do not follow our law of nature, *svadharma*, "We would sin against our nature."[112] If that is the case, what is the meaning of "free volition of human beings"?

It is to be noted that most commentators see the system of *cāturvarṇa* as the *Gītā* presents it, as an ideal division of society on natural lines, "with the division and coordination of functions based on psychological attitudes"[113] or according to the natural dispositions of the individual. Vinoba Bhave says, "The idea behind *varṇa-dharma* is very beautiful."[114] What he and others object to is the regimentation found in the present caste system. Gandhi, who always stood for the equality of all men, did not think in terms of abolishing the caste system as such. He writes, "It is wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to

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[108]*loc. cit.*

[109]*Ibid.*, p. 365.

[110]*Ibid.*, p. 364.

[111]*antyajo viprajātiś ca eka eva sahodaraḥ ekayoniprasutas ca ekaskhena jayate*

[112]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 365.

[113]Rohit Mehta, *From Mind to Supermind*, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1966, p. 68.

[114]Vinoba Bhave, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it, or a crop because of weeds. The outcasteness in the sense we understand it, has therefore to be destroyed altogether...Untouchability is the product, therefore, not of the caste system but of the distinction of high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it."[115] Thus, Gandhi only attempted to purify the system. He does not agree with Radhakrishnan and others who hold that *guṇa* and *karma* are not inherited by birth. "The law of *varṇa* is nothing if not by birth.[116] Mahadev Desai who has translated Gandhi's *Anāsktiyoga,* takes the same position. He writes, "The functions were hereditary, because heredity is a law of nature."[117] But, Desai admits that the system "today is a travesty, a fossil formed out of the incrustations of customs and practices of several centuries" and pleads that no one should "judge the original from the ghost of it."[118] Vinoba Bhave links the system of *varṇas* with *svadharma*. He says, "The reason why I like the four *varṇas* is that both naturalness and *dharma* are found in it. If you give up *svadharma* nothing will be gained."[119] He mourns the decay of this system, not so much for the compartmentalisation and the evils which go with the system, as for men who give up the trade pursued by their ancestors. He thinks that when a man gives up his traditional trade—*svadharma* in his thinking—and takes up a new job, so many years are wasted in learning the new job. Thus the most valuable years of one's life are wasted because of the search for a new and different profession and "it is for this reason that Hinduism has discovered for us the system of *varṇa*.[120]

K.M. Munshi, another interpreter of the *Gītā* for the modern man, thinks that the fourfold order "is a social synthesis, natural fabric, a creation instinct with life". He goes

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[115]M.K. Gandhi, *Communal Unity*, Ahemadabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1949, p. 7.

[116]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 119.

[117]Mahadev Desai, "My Submission" in *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 104.

[118]*Ibid.*, p. 102.

[119]Vinoba Bhave, op. cit., p. 223.

[120]*Ibid.*, p. 224.

on to add, "It is a universal and eternal social synthesis based on the nature of man."[121] He admits that the system of *varṇa* is not the caste system as we know it. Unlike Gandhi, Munshi places the Brahmin at the apex of the social pyramid, for it is he who is dominated by *sattva*, purity.[112] The Śūdra being dominated by *tamas*, is at the bottom of the social scale. In this 'low' and 'high' distinction of the social orders, unfortunately Munshi is not far from the advocates of the rigid caste system. He fails to take into account the fact that those who are at the "apex" of society with their "pure nature", live at the expense of the man at the "bottom". Though he says that the *Gītā* "transfers the emphasis from birth to the individual nature of man,"[123] he is quick to point out that one's nature is shaped by hereditary and early influences in the family and the group in which one is born. This amounts to saying that the chances of a Śūdra boy acquiring the nature of a Brahmin are very meagre. He goes too far in his apology for the *cāturvarṇa*, when he says, "Under any other arrangement ideals would cease to ennoble life; men with 'devilish gifts' would shape social environment."[124] Perhaps this is reading too much into the statements of the *Gītā*, which simply recognises the system in vogue. The author of the *Gītā* claims divine origin to it, "because", as one progressive author puts it, "the transition from a primitive classless society to a class society and the consolidation of the *varṇāśrama* system had to contend against powerful opposition accompanied by great philosophical activity."[125]

The fourfold division of society, in the opinion of Aurobindo, is totally different from the caste system as it exists today. In his view, the teachings of the *Gītā* on this division, do not justify the existence of the present system. Says he, "The existing caste system...in no way corresponds to the description of the *Gītā*... The law of *guṇa* or quality is still

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[121]K.M. Munshi, *Bhagavadgītā, and Modern Life*, p. 62.
[122]*Ibid.*, p. 64.
[123]*Ibid.*, p. 59.
[124]*Ibid.*, p. 65.
[125]K. Damodaran, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

less a part of the later system. There all is rigid custom, *ācāra*, with no reference to the need of the individual nature."[126] He takes into task those who insist that it is the law of nature for a man to follow the profession of his parents, without any regard for his personal bent and capacities. This kind of blind acceptance of traditional professions, only leads a man away from his own perfection and spiritual freedom, Aurobindo emphatically points out, "The *Gītā's* words refer to the ancient system of *caturvarṇa*, as it existed, or was supposed to exist in its ideal purity,...and it should be considered in that connection alone."[127] He admits that there is considerable difficulty as to the outward significance of the system.

The four orders of society, as it existed in ancient India, had three aspects: a social and economic one, a cultural one and a spiritual one. The first two aspects were in the line of a division of labour, which brought maximum coordination between different groups. As time passed, "an endeavour was made to found and stabilize the whole arrangement of society on the partition of these four functions among four clearly marked classes."[128] Some kind of cultural idea existed along with this economic division, and that gave each class its religious custom, its law of honour and ethical rule. Finally, this system acquired a religious sanction and a profound spiritual use and significance. As Aurobindo sees it, "This spiritual significance is the real kernel of the teaching of the *Gītā*."[129] The *Gītā* saw this system in existence and it recognised both the ideas and the system. The external aspect of *cāiurvarṇa* are "not fundamental division, but stages in the development of our manhood."[130] Man has to strive towards *sattva gaṇa*, with his load of ignorance and inertia. This does not mean, as K.M. Munshi would have it, that we have to go through all the four stages of development in our births, namely, from Śūdrahood to Brahminhood and then

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[126]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 468.
[127]*Ibid.*, p. 469.
[128]*loc. cit.*
[129]*Ibid.*, p. 470.
[130]*Ibid.*, p. 479.

seek salvation from that position at the apex. If this is so, "there would be no room for the *Gītā*'s assertion that even the Śūdra or Chandāla can by turning his life Godwards climb straight to spiritual liberty and perfection."[131] On the basis of this and similar statements of the *Gītā*, Aurobindo arrives at his fundamental position on *varṇa*: "What the *Gītā* is concerned with is not the validity of the Aryan social order now abolished or in a state of deliquescence,... but the relation of a man's outward life to his inward being, the evolution of his action from his soul and inner law of nature."[132] If we realise this secret of the fourfold activity, Aurobindo tells us that it would become a wide doorway to a swiftest and largest reality of the most high spiritual perfection. "This we can do if we turn the action of *swadharma* into a worship of the inner Godhead, the universal Spirit,... and eventually surrender the whole action into his hands, *mayi sannyasya karmāṇi*".[133]

Thus far we have been discussing the view of writers who wholly support the *varṇa* system or those who give a spiritual interpretation to make it relevant for our times. The authors we have discussed, see *svadharma* in relation to *varṇa dharma*, either on the basis of birth like Gandhi or on the basis of *guṇa*, like Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo, *et. al.* Now we will turn to somc authors who reject the system, in spite of the divine authority behind it.

Mahadev Desai, while discussing the relation between *varṇas* and *svadharma*, admits that the division according to the natural abilities should be flexible and one's allotted task should take new meaning in each age. He quotes James Russell Lowell's lines, "New occasions teach new duties, Time makes ancient good uncouth" to point out the need for change. But, he does not reject the *Gītā* doctrine of *varṇāśramadharma*.[134] He too, like Gandhi, is concerned with restoring the purity of the system. So, in general the commentators we discussed

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[131]*Ibid.*, p. 480.
[132]*Ibid.*, p. 481.
[133]*Ibid.*, p. 481.
[134]Cf. Mahadev Desai, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

above, have been defenders of the *Gītā* teaching on *varṇa vyavastha*.

Kakasaheb Kalelkar, who is a Gandhian and a keen student of the *Gītā* writes, "The arrangement of society according to *varṇas* is not a necessary corollary of the Vedic philosophy of the *Geeta*. The development of social virtues mentioned in the sixteenth chapter of the *Geeta* does not need the *chāturvarṇya* at all."[135] He thinks that the very concept of *Kuladharma* was the result of the over-systematisation of the Aryans and this in the end "choked the very vitality of social existence."[136] He contends that the otherworldly, life-renouncing commentators of the *Gītā* have concentrated only on the *mokṣa* of the individual and have missed the message of the *Gitā* explaining the rise and fall of human cultures. From this angle, it is necessary for us to re-interpret the *Gītā*. This will force us to understand the injunctions of the *Gītā*, such as *varṇa vyavastha*, "in the light of our modern needs and wider ideals."[137] He radically differs with some of the authors we discussed above. Says he, "Any hierarchy of superior and inferior beings can last only so long as the bulk of the population is meek and fatalistic enough to submit to it. Spiritually, this hierarchy is untenable specially as we proclaim that the soul of man partakes of divinity whose attributes are immaculate and equi-minded."[138] Kalelkar strongly opposes the system, primarily because full development of the individual is not assured in the *vyavastha*, that is the caste system. He points out that the system has not improved the Indian society in any way and we have not got any evidence to show that our progress is greater than that of other societies, where such a system never existed. He admits that *varṇa* of an individual is determined by his birth and notes that all the talk about the division on the basis of *guṇa* is not real to life. He observes, "The Hindu society fell an easy prey to the attacks of foreigners...because they sadly

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[135]K. Kalelkar, *The Geeta, or Jeevan Yoga*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1967, p. 23.

[136]*Ibid.*, p. 20.

[137]*Ibid.*, p. 21.

[138]*Ibid.*, p. 22.

lacked social solidarity and the understanding of natural forces that govern society."[139] The system is certainly against the spirit of Vedanta, which teaches the dignity and equality of all human beings. Kalelkhar observes rightly that even converts to other religions carry with them their Hindu social structures, which have no sanction in their scriptures. He pleads to lay aside *varṇa vyavastha*, which has nothing to do with the central message of the *Gītā*. Caste system really makes it difficult "to achieve full national solidarity,"[140] warns Kalelkar.

The Malayalam writer Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai is still more critical of *cāturvarṇaṁ*. He holds that the mythic author of the *Gītā*, Vyasa, is putting words into the mouth of Kṛṣṇa to establish the superiority of the Brahmins. He writes, "*Cāturvarṇaṁ* is based on the superiority of the Brahmins. Even in a philosophical text like the *Gītā*, the *varṇa-vyavastha* has acquired undue importance...The author of the *Gītā* is at pains to establish the dangers of mixing the races through marriage."[141] Kuttipuzha argues that there is no justification in the interpretation of some modern writers, who see the fourfold division on the basis of *guṇa*. The text does not warrant this. *Maya sṛṣṭam* implies *varṇa* on the basis of birth. He refers to Sankara's interpretation of this verse. The *ācārya* not only takes *varṇa* according to birth, but also establishes the Brahmin superiority by quoting the line from the *puruṣa-sūkta—brahmaṇo asya mukhamāsīt:* the mouth of the Divine Victim became the Brahmin. The expressions, *svabhāvajam*, (born of nature, B.G. XVIII, 44), *sahajam*, born together (B.G. XVIII. 48) denote division by birth. He categorically denies the modern view that the fourfold division takes place after birth. "The *Gītā* has not approved this idea anywhere. On the other hand, the *Gītā* simply incorporated the age-old blind and cruel system of caste and gave it divine authority."[142] Kuttipuzha also dis-

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[139]*Ibid.*, p. 25.

[140]*loc. cit.*

[141]Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, *Selected Essays*. (in Malayalam), National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1969, p. 343, (translation is mine).

[142]*Ibid.*, p. 344.

approves the rendering of *paricaryātmakaṁ karma Śūdrasyā 'pi svabhavajam* or work of the character of service is the duty of a Sūdra born of his nature (B.G. XVIII. 44). He maintains that *paricaryātmakam* implies the obligatory work of a slave, not the modern idea of service to others. On the whole, the *Gītā's* teaching on *varṇadharma* cannot be re-interpreted to suit our mordern needs; they have to be rejected in toto. "We should not be guided by the false idea that whatever is in the *Gītā*, is eternal truth. Putting the old wine in new bottles, won't change the nature of the wine."[143] Kuttipuzha finds justification for the rejection of certain teachings of the *Gītā* in the text itself: "...Having reflected on it fully do as thou choosest" (B.G. XVIII. 63). In his criticism of the *varṇa vyavastha*, Kuttipuzha is more radical than Kalelkar and says that the *Gītā* teaching on this social aspect of Indian life has been a curse to this land. He declares quite contrary to the *Gītā*, "The best means to achieve national integration is inter-caste marriages. That is the surest way to destroy caste altogether."[144]

From the above discussion it is clear that, if we accept the teaching of the *Gītā*, the freedom of the individual would become very limited, if at all he can be called free. The role of a man in society is determined by his birth. If we reject this idea and accept the shaping of personality on the basis of *guṇa*, then also we end up in the determinism of nature. Aurobindo echoes this predicament in the following words:

> At any rate, at least nine-tenths of our freedom of will is a palpable fiction, that will is created and determined not by its own self-existent action at a given moment, but by our past, our heredity, our training, the whole tremendous complex thing called *Karma*, which is, behind us, the whole past action of Nature on us and the world converging in the individual, determining what he is, determining what his will shall be at a given moment and determining, as far as analyses can see, even its action at that moment."[145]

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[143] *loc. cit.*

[144] *Ibid.*, p. 345.

[145] Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 200-201.

This is to say that we are not what we make ourselves, but what we are made. What then, is freedom, *mukti*? Freedom, according to the *Gītā* is mastery of the lower self by the higher; the natural by the spiritual. The very idea of freedom itself has to be given up in this spiritual struggle. We realize the meaning of freedom only at that stage when we sacrifice our 'freedom' and "...make our individual being one with it (the Self) in being and consciousness and in its individual nature of action only an instrument of a supreme Will, the one Will that is really free."[146] This is the transcending of all three *guṇas*, *triguṇātīta*. Until one is drawn to this lofty preception of freedom, one shall remain bound to his *guṇa* and *dharma*. The question remains unanswered whether this is freedom as we understand it in our daily experience. Does the *Gītā* negate it or fulfil it with a deeper concept?

The *Gītā* makes it plain that *dharma* and freedom are inseparably connected. It presents a dialectic, a constant tension and interaction, between man's bondage to his *dharma* and his freedom. Man deludes himself, if he believes that the choice of *dharma* is open to him. Each one has his own *dharma*, the nature formed within him by innumerable births, the accumulated effect of all his *karmas*, and whether he wills it or not, he cannot act against it. The surest way to freedom is to understand that *dharma* and comply with its demands. It is this *dharma* which holds the society together as well as our inner and outer activities. Aurobindo summarises the profound meaning of the *Gītā* doctrine of *dharma* in the following words: "*Dharma* in the Indian conception is not merely the good, the right, morality and justice, ethics; it is the whole government of all the relations of man with other beings, with Nature, with God, considered from the point of view of a divine principle working itself out in forms and laws of action, forms of the inner and outer life, orderings of relations of every kind in this world."[147] The purpose of *avatara* itself is to protect this *dharma*.

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[146]*Ibid.*, p. 202.
[147]*Ibid.*, p, 155.

CHAPTER III

The Science of Right Action

The commentaries on the *Gītā* roughly follow two distinct paths, namely, the path of renunciation of action and of affirmation of action. Each school of thought sees in the *Gītā*, strands of teachings to support its respective position. The *ācāryas*, whom Kalelkar calls, "other-worldly and life renouncing," took the former line of approach. According to this school, though it is necessary to perform actions by the seeker, the realised soul should relinquish all actions in the post-enlightened stage. Considering action as a useless appendage in the path of liberation, such a one should instead pass the remainder of his earthly life only in the contemplation of the liberating knowledge. These commentators believe that the central teaching of the *Gītā* supports this position. Over against this school, there are the advocates of action. They maintain that the *Gītā* urges that not only the seekers, but even the liberated souls should remain performing action till death in an unattached manner and that no attempt should ever be made of an actual renunciation of action.[1] What is to be renounced is not action, but the fruits of action. On the whole, modern commentators try—not very successfully, one should note—to strike a balance between these two approaches. Tilak, who is undoubtely the champion of works, or activism as most of his reviewers and critics prefer to describe it, places Śankaracarya as the leader of the former school.[2] Tilak himself does not hesitate to claim the leadership of the second school of thought. He writes, "there is no reason why this book of mine should not be called the first comparative exposition of the *Gītā*, in support of Right Action".[3] Undoubtedly, his is the most out-

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[1]Cf. G.W. Kaveeshwar, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
[2]Cf. B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
[3]*Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

standing and exhaustive commentary which emphasizes *Karmayoga*, the path of action. In this chapter, we will examine some of the salient features of his doctrine of works, or rather the *Gītā* doctrine of works as Tilak sees it.

Tilak's New Interpretation of Karma

Tilak belongs to the class of Indian national leaders who are usually called "extremists" by historians of the Indian national movement. These "extremists",—leaders like Aurobindo, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee belonged to this group—unlike the "moderates" in the political movement based their political philosophy not on western concepts, but on the classical values of Indian philosophy and culture. They warned that India should not become the "brown ape of Europe", but should rise to its ancient greatness by following her own traditions and *dharma*. With this end in view, Tilak, along with other leaders who shared his ideals, embarked on a programme of religious revival. In his thinking, nationalism had no future apart from a religious awakening. He took initiatives in organizing *Ganapati Pūja* and other festivals on a national scale. As a result, as Damadoran correctly observes, "Indian nationalism became Hindu nationalism" and "political radicalism and religious revivalism tended to go hand in hand".[4] Though on the surface the *Gītā Rahsya* does not betray the political radicalism of Tilak, his political commitments are just below the surface. To understand the full impact and import of the *Gītā-Rahsya*, we have to see it in the light of the nationalist ideology of Tilak.

Though Tilak is generally an exponent of Advaita philosophy, he does not consider the world as mere illusion. He affirms the objective reality of the world and says the "the one sole, immortal and qualityless Ātman-Element saturates fully and eternally fully both the Body and the Cosmos."[5] The highest metaphysical ideal for Tilak, is to know that there is only one Ātman in all created beings. On the basis of this conviction, he calls for action which would lead to

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[4]Damodaran, *op. cit*., p. 409.

[5]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit*., p. 357.

the welfare of the country. He writes, "If a man seeks unity with Deity, he must necessarily seek unity with the interest of the world also, and work for it. If he does not, then the unity is not perfect because there is union between two elements out of the three (man and Deity) and the third (the world) is left out. I have thus solved the question for myself, and I hold that serving the world and thus serving His will, is the surest way to salvation, and this way can be followed by remaining in the world, and not going away from it."[6] He does not hide his feelings about the Indian nation. He is inclined to think that the nation has failed because in her eagerness to seek God, she has ignored God's intention for humanity. All through the pages of his commentary, one can see his desire to serve the country and to restore her to a state of absolute well-being having "suffered because it has not been supported by a proper attention to material, mental and social activities in which the spirit has to find its existence."[7]

As P.M. Modi rightly observes, Tilak maintains that the essence of the teaching of the *Gītā* is *jñānamūlaka bhakti-pradhāna karmayoga*. That is to say, "all other *yogas* lead to the path of action."[8] It is this conviction that leads him to take Śankara to task for having begun a tradition of *Gītā* interpretations in which the *Gītā's* plain teaching of the science of *Karmayoga* was bent to make *Jñānayoga* superior to that of action. He argues, "In short the *Śamkarabhāṣya* has been written in order to show that the teaching of the *Gītā* is consistent with a particular Vedic path which—after proving it to be the most excellent one—was recommended by *Śamkarācārya*,...to show that the Blessed Lord in *Gītā* has preached the Śamkara cult, that action is only a means of acquiring knowledge combined with renunciation of Action."[9] Tilak holds that the *apūrvata*, newness, of the *Gītā*

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[6]*Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

[7]P. Nagaraja Rao, *The Bhagavad Gītā and the Changing World*, Ramakrishna Seva Samiti, Ahmedabad, 1953, p. 52.

[8]P.M. Modi, "Method of Interpreting the *Gītā*" in *Studies in the Gītā*, p. 64.

[9]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

is the "philosophy of Energism (*karma*)." After carefully considering the significance of the sevenfold *Mīmāṁsa* criterion for interpreting a text, he comes to the conclusion that all these criteria point to the real meaning of the *Gītā* as consisting in spreading of the gospel of *karma-yoga*, *karma-yoga* being the be-all and end-all of its teaching.[10] He argues that the vision of the *ācārayas* and other commentators has become one-sided because of their doctrinal tilt in favour of their respective cults. Tilak sets before himself the object of thoroughly examining the *Gītā* and "in detail [to] show how all the statements, deductions or chapters in it can be explained as being connected together on the basis of the philosophy of Energism (*karma*)."[11] In this attempt, Tilak does not advocate any philosophical, religious or political sectarianism, even though he argues against the classical commentators for maintaining that the *Gītā* teaches that dharma cannot be transcended by any form of renunciation of *dharma*.

Tilak, like any other Vedantin, maintains that release, *mukti*, is the final goal of human life. The *Gītā* teaches the surest path to that goal through *Karmayoga*. Says he, "The chief object of the *Gītā* is to explain which is the most excellent state of man from the metaphysical point of view, and to decide the fundamental principles of ethics as regards the Doable and the Not-Doable on that basis...the fundamental basis of Righteous Action *sadācaraṇa* is the change which takes place in the character of the man, as a result of the particular Peace (*śānti*) which is acquired by the human Atman by the continual worship and direct Realization of that Immortal substance which is at the root of the world."[12] This statement itself establishes Tilak's credentials as a Vedantin. It also makes clear his philosophical scheme to maintain the unity of metaphysics, religion, psychology and ethics.

The context of the *Gītā*—the battlefield and Arjuna's

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[10]*Ibid.*, p. 31-32. The *Mīmāṁsa* criterion is expressed in the following verse: *upakramopasaṁhārāv abhyaso pūrvatā phalam arthavādopapatti ca lingaṁ tatparyanirṇaye.*

[11]*Ibid.*, p. 39.

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 711.

dilemma to fulfil his *dharma* in the field—itself points to the nobility and necessity of action. Kṛṣṇa gives his advice to Arjuna in the nature of a mandate for action. Tilak affirms that man "has a spiritual destiny, and that an individual is not merely a social being."[13] Arjuna's doubts concerned not only his immediate problems, that is, taking up arms against his cousins, but also his spiritual destiny itself. So, in response to the total need for Arjuna, and by implication all the needs of those who take the conflicts of life seriously the divine command is given: "Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment."[14] This and similar verses from the central message of the *Gītā* as Tilak sees it is addressed to the confused man who has lost his past. And therefore, "the subject-matter of the *Gītā* is to show whether or not there are any means for ascertaining what course should be followed by a person on such an occasion and if so, what those means are."[15] Tilak explains at length the meanings of the words *karma* and *yoga* in the *Gītā*. He makes it plain that in the *Gītā*, *karma* is not limited to the "doctrines laid down by the Mīmāṁsa school regarding the sacrificial ritual etc....The word *karma* as used in the exposition made in the *Gītā* must not be taken in the restricted meaning of Action prescribed by the *Śrutis* or *Smṛtis*, but in a more comprehensive meaning. In short, all the Actions which a man performs...are included in the word *karma*...."[16] It is in the light of this wider meaning that we have to look at his definition of *karma-yoga-śāstra*. He writes,

> That science by means of which we can decide such questions as: Which is the best and purest of the several 'yogas', means, or process in which a particular Action can be performed; whether it can always be followed, if

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[13]S.H. Jhabwala, *Geeta and Its Commentators*, Dhawale Popular, Bombay, 1960. p. 71.

[14]*Bhagavadgītā*, III. 19.

[15]B.G. Tilak. *op. cit.*, p. 75.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 75.

not what are the exceptions to it, and how they arise; why is that path which we call good, really good, or that which we call bad, really bad, and on the strength of what, is this goodness or badness to be decided and who is to do so or what is the underlying principle in it etc. is known as the '*karma-yoga-śāstra*', (science of *Karmayoga*) or as expressed briefly in the *Gītā* '*yoga-śāstra*' (the science of yoga). 'Good' or 'bad' are words in ordinary use and the following other words: propitious and unpropitious, or beneficial and harmful, or meritorious and non-meritorious, or sin and virtue, or righteousness, are used in the same sense.[17]

Doubts could be expressed about the comprehensiveness of this definition. It is a matter of debate whether Arjuna's predicament is fully appreciated in this formulation. His problem was not limited to the attitude, egoistic or non-egoistic, with which he should fight, but covered the whole question of war itself and the consequences which ensued. Nevertheless, the definition gives us an insight into Tilak's concept of *Karmayoga*. It is to be noted that Tilak admits elsewhere that the doubts that assailed Arjuna were not groundless, and that his moral confusion just before the battle was intended by the *Gītā* as a paradigm of great moral dilemma that only really good and wise men can get into.[18]

Tilak sees the meaning of certain verses which specifically refer to *Karmayoga* in the light of the above definition. He believes that the true issue is not choosing between acting and not acting, but knowing the science of how to act properly. To prove this point he cites, "who is steeped in the (equable) Reason remains unto uched both by sin or merit in this (world); therefore take shelter in Yoga. The cleverness (skillfulness or trick) of performing Action (without acquiring the merit or sin) is known as (*Karma*) *Yoga*."[19] He concludes his comment on this verse by pointing out that when a man performs action in this way with an equable

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[17]*Ibid.*, p. 83.
[18]Cf. B.G. Tilak, *Gītā-Rahasya*, pp. 41-54.
[19]*Bhagavadgītā*, II.50 (Tilak's translation).

reason, there is no neglect of worldly duties and at the same time the path is open to complete release. The shelter in the *yoga* gives one power to stand up and perform one's duty.[20] When the doubts are destroyed by wisdom, man realizes the right path of action. Tilak never loses sight of the final goal, i.e. release, when he speaks of *Karmayoga*. Redemption of Ātman is the highest ideal according to the Vedanta and it is claimed to be the special feature of his viewpoint.[21] One's *dharma* in relation to the society is the outward expression of this dynamic action, oriented towards release. If the science of medicine—*āyur-veda*, that is the veda relating to Health – is considered to serve as a means of salvation because it helps to protect the body, Tilak asks, why has *karma-yoga-śāstra* been divorced from the metaphysical philosophy of release by our *ācāryas?* He contends that we do not perform our worldly activities without any consideration of spiritual values. He argues therefore, "We consider whether or not these activites are conducive to Atmic benefit, simultaneously with considering their external effects."[22] He refers to Aristotle's ethics and asserts that metaphysical perfection is the highest duty of every man and it is improper to speak of doables and non-doables outside the context of metaphysical philosophy. The *Gītā*, according to Tilak, fulfils this in its teaching of the science of *Karmayoga*.

Tilak does not consider *Karmayoga* only as a means to the final end, which can be got rid of after realizing that end. Man has to perform actions with a spirit of detachment as long as he lives, even though he has realized his oneness with Brahman. This action is not in the *Mīmāṁsa* sense of rituals or as means of purifying the mind. The *Karmayoga* described in the *Gītā* makes it clear that "even a scientist who has acquired Knowledge, must perform actions prescribed...with a disinterested frame of mind and it can never be a preliminary preparation for Renunciation: because, in this path, a man can never abandon Action, and

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[20]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, IV. 42.
[21]Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
[22]*Ibid.*, p. 92.

the only question is of obtaining Release."[23] He also rejects the idea that both renunciation and action are equally productive of release. When Arjuna thought of becoming a sanyasi he was told, "Though the path of renunciation, and the path of *Karmayoga* are equally productive of Release (*niḥreyasa*), yet out of these two paths the worth or importance of *Karmayoga* is greater (*viśiṣyate*)."[24] Tilak naturally underscores the latter half of this verse. He claims that while he accepts the plain and straightforward meaning of this verse, many commentators twist its meaning to suit their doctrines.[25]

The delusion of Arjuna in the battlefield is very real and it is symbolic of the spiritual problems of all men. Tilak takes this confusion of duty—which path to choose—very seriously. In fact, the purpose of the *Gītā* is to clear this confusion. He points out that the ultimate goal of *Karmayoga* is not going to be specified by *dharma*, but by metaphysics. This is the reason why Kṛṣṇa goes on to teach higher truths to Arjuna which were not immediately relevant to him when he put down arms in the battlefield. What does one's *dharma* specify exactly? This is not as simple a question as it appears to be. When man has to decide what is moral and what is immoral, definitions of *dharma* do not help him at all. *Dharma* is sometimes called *ācāraprabhava* (born of custom); *dhāranāt* (something which upholds or keeps together); or *codanālakṣana* (some precept which has been dictated). He writes, "not only is there much difference between customs and customs but, as there are numerous consequences of one and the same act, and also as *codana*, or, precepts of *ṛṣis*, are also different, we have to look out for some other way of determining what *dharma* is when there are doubts in the matter. Following even the path of venerable men cannot be said to be [a] solution. The venerable men—*mahājanaḥ*—had their problems and their solutions need not be ideal for others."[26]

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[23]*Ibid.*, p. 423.

[24]*Bhagavadgītā*, V. 2. (Tilak's translation).

[25]Cf. B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 970.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 481.

After carefully examining various alternatives, Tilak rejects all of them, for they are all inadequate to guide a confused man. Finally, he finds the solution in the *Gītā*. He thinks that the following verse provides the seeker with the correct rules for right conduct, "Your authority extends only to the performance of Action: (obtaining or not obtaining) the Fruit is never within your authority (that is, never within your control); (therefore), do not be one who performs Action with the (avaricious) motive (in mind) that a particular fruit should be obtained (of his Action); nor do you also insist on not-performing Action."[27] Tilak's comments on this verse, in a way summarise his interpretation of *karma-yoga*. He writes, "The four quarters of this stanza are mutually complementary; and, therefore. without their overlapping each other, the entire import of *Karma-Yoga* is given in a short and beautiful form."[28] Elsewhere he points out that the doctrines contained in this verse are very important and "...from the point of view of *Karma-Yoga*, the four quarters of the above stanza may be said to be four aphorisms (*catuh-sūtri*) of the science of *Karma-Yoga*, or the *Gītā* religion."[29] Tilak has no doubt that these aphorisms will be a guiding light to those who are confused about their *dharma*. Besides, when being led by these, man will attain both metaphysical happiness and his share of worldly happiness.

Desireless Action

The idea of *niṣkāma karma*, desireless action, has been hailed by many as one of the most important contributions of the *Bhagavadgītā* to ethical philosophy. Tilak holds that this concept is a perfect synthesis of the opposing tendencies in the moral life. Tilak analyses at length the 'categorical imperative' of Kant and concedes that it comes close to the ethics of the *Gītā*, but fails to do justice to all

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[27]B.G. Tilak's translation of *Bhagavadgītā* II. 47: *karmany evā'dhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana mā karmaphalahetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmani.*

[28]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 895.

[29]*Ibid.*, p. 155.

factors of the moral questions involved. Its formalism and the suppression of sensibility make the system unacceptable to Tilak. On the other hand, as P.N. Srinivasachari puts it, "the *Gītā*, theory of disinterested work is based on a synthetic view of human nature and harmonises its contradictions; it does not suppress the senses and their activities, but sublimates them to spiritual purpose."[30] The concept of desireless action is based on the universality of action, that no man alive is free from performing his *dharma*, directed towards his own release and the welfare of the world. All human actions are motivated by the desire to attain happiness, whether material or spiritual. It is specifically in this context of natural human tendency, that the *Gītā* speaks of desireless action. Tilak takes a realistic attitude towards the problem of happiness and unhappiness in this life, and towards the corresponding passions of desire and avarice. He analyses human experience and history and comes to the conclusion that man spends most of his life unhappy and discontented. But this discontentment is at the root of all human attempts to better his life. He writes, "In short, discontent is the seed of future prosperity, effort, opulence, and even Release; and it must always be borne in mind by everybody that if this discontent is totally annihilated, we will be nowhere, whether in this world or in the next."[31] The *Gītā* itself encouraged the desire of Arjuna which sprang from his discontentment. But that was a desire to know the manifestation of the Divine.[32] In other words, this was a motivation proper to the *dharma* of Arjuna. At the same time, if a man's desire for something which ultimately is harmful for his well-being is not checked, he will end up in greater unhappiness. Tilak makes an all-important distinction between dissatisfaction and its attendant desires. The principle he advocates is desireless action. His opinion is that we should distinguish desire as two types, (a) desire for the fruits of our action and (b) desire which motivates us to the right action. He writes, "The device or skill (*kauśalam*) of giving up only that hope which causes unhappiness and per-

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[30]P. N. Srinivasachari, *The Ethical Philosophy of the Gītā*, p. 50.
[31]B. G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
[32]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, X. 18.

forming one's duties according to one's status in life is known as *Yoga* or *Karma-Yoga*."[33]

The ideal act according to the *Gītā* is subjectively pure, non-egoistic and egoless. This in no way implies that an act which is immoral can be done with a non-egoistic frame of mind. The rightness and the wrongness of the action actually depends on its contents as well as on the attitude with which one approaches it. It is one thing to be impelled to action by the idea of *niṣkāma-karma* and another thing to fix an act that will in fact lead to it. Tilak is aware of this problem and also the natural objection that these two types of desires—desire for the fruit and desire that motivates actions—are only separable in thought, not in action. He insists that this separation is possible and the text of the *Gītā* makes it. He writes,

> Action, in the gross material world, which are lifeless in themselves, are not themselves the root cause of unhappiness, but that the true root of unhappiness is the Hope for result, Desire, or Attachment with which man performs those actions, it naturally follows that in order to prevent this unhappiness, it is quite enough if a person by controlling his mind, gives up attachment, Desire or Hope of result entertained by him towards the objects of pleasure; and it follows logically that it is not necessary to give up all objects of pleasure, or Actions, or Desires as prescribed by the *Saṁnyasa* school.[34]

Here we see that Tilak's objections against the school of thought which advocates renunciation is in line with his philosophy of activism or energism as it is sometimes called. But a doubt lingers whether man is capable of performing an action without a goal that gives a meaning to the act. If one were to eschew all consideration of consequences would that not render all voluntary action almost impossible? The absence of any deliberation on the meaning of an action may deprive that action of all meaning. Such activity "can only be of the nature of a mere physiological movement, mechanical

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[33]B. G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
[34]*Ibid.*, p. 151.

response, or what is known as reflex action."[35] *Avatāra* itself has a definite goal and it brings about that set goal, "which comes under the meaning of *phalam*, fruit, that is, the protection of the good and the establishment of righteousness."[36] It seems that Tilak does not take this problem too seriously. He is for a complete and total abandonment of the results of actions. Desire for the results destroys the purity of action. He writes,

> Whatever the nature of the Action, when one does not give up the Desire to do it, nor also one's activity, but goes on performing what one wants to do, being equally prepared for the resulting pain or happiness, with an aloof frame of mind, and without entertaining the hope for the result, not only does one escape the evil effects due to non-control of Thirst or discontent, but also the danger of the world becoming desolate as a result of Action being destroyed in the attempt to destroy Thirst, and all our mental impulses remain pure and beneficial to all created beings.[37]

It is a generally accepted principle in Indian thinking that moral life "consists in the giving up of egoistic, utilitarian and acquisitive instincts, *karmabhāva*, and *kartṛbhāva*."[38] The *Gītā* contains many verses which support this position. Over against this position, there is action motivated by the desire of the fruits. This is the offspring of pathological love seated in the propulsions of the senses and is therefore influenced by the *guṇas*, which consitute the mental makeup of a man. It is the striving of every moral man to free himself from the preoccupation with ends and establish the inherent right of the sovereignity of the spirit or moral autonomy, as Srinivaschari calls it. The *Gītā's* specific advice to assure this freedom is to renounce attachment to the fruit of action. "He who had renounced attachment to the fruit of action, who is ever content, and free from all dependence, he

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[35]G.W. Kaveeshwar, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
[36]*Bhagavatgītā*, IV. 8.
[37]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
[38]P.N. Srinivasachari, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

though immersed in action, yet acts not,"[39] Tilak's paraphrase of the first part of this verse is worth noticing. He says, "...one who does not possess a Reason, which has taken shelter, *āśraya*, in the means of obtaining the fruit of action for a particular result."[40] He holds, in the light of this and many other verses, that in dealing with ethical problems, "one must consider principally the Reason of the doer, rather than the external results of his Actions; and that equability of Reason is the true principle underlying an ethically correct mode of life."[41]

Tilak is fully aware that motive is necessary for human actions. Desireless action does not in any way mean that we should perform our tasks thoughtlessly or without a plan or in a manner unrelated to its purpose. Tilak's interpretation of *lokasaṁgraha*, which we discussed earlier, bears witness to this understanding. What he emphasises again and again is freedom from attachment to the results of action. Even when we perform our duties for the welfare of the world, it should not be result-motivated, but simply as our *dharma*. "*Lokasaṁgraha* is an important duty," he writes, "but it must not be forgotten that the advice given...that all acts should be performed being free from attachment, applies equally to *lokasaṁgraha*."[42] The acts become meaningful and a source of happiness when they are performed with the desire of dedicating all of it, including the fruits to the Lord. Here, one can say that a desire is at work. This is a noble desire, or motivation, because it is not result-oriented. The peace and happiness which ensues from the act of dedicating it to the Lord is not tied to the fruits of the action. So long as man is not free from the acquisitive sense, he will remain a slave to his actions. Those who are enlightened perform their actions till death with the idea of dedicating them to Brahman. Tilak interprets this as the final culmination of knowledge and action.[43] Mahadev Desai puts the same idea

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[39] *Bhagavadgītā*, IV. 20.
[40] B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 952.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 530.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 466, Cf. p. 690.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 603.

more succinctly, "Make every act of thine a sacrifice unto the Lord, sacrifice even the thought that what is offered is a sacrifice. All is sacrifice that takes you near to the Lord."[44]

Tilak leans heavily on verse II. 49, which we cited earlier in order to establish the right attitude towards the fruits of action. He rejects the interpretation of *Buddhi-yoga* in the sense of *Jñāna-yoga*. (Here Śankara is with Tilak. Śankara gives the meaning, *samatva-buddhi-yoga*, that is, the *yoga* of equability of reason). Tilak draws the conclusion that those who perform actions fall into two categories: Firstly, there are those who keep an eye merely on the fruit—for example, on the question of how many will be benefited thereby and to what extent and so on. Secondly, there are those who keep their reason steady and desireless, and remain unconcerned as to the fruits of action which result from the combination of *karma* and *dharma*. As the second half of the verse points out, those who perform their actions with their eyes towards its *phala*, fruits, are of a lower nature while those acting with equanimous reason are of higher nature.[45]

The *Gītā* makes it plain in several verses that action itself is inferior, but becomes a means of release when it has the right motive behind it. It is the spirit of detachment which sanctifies an action, which is otherwise a means that leads nowhere. "Therefore," Tilak concludes, "The *Gītā* in discriminating the doable and the not-doable, attaches a higher importance to the desireless, equable and unattached Reason of the doer, than to the external result of the action...and the welfare of all created beings resulting from such a mode of life is the external or concomittant result of that equability of Reason."[46]

Giving up of the fruits of action, as we have seen above, specifically refers to the egoistic attachment to the *phalam*, the fruit. Here the fruit of action means the egoistic consequences concerning the agent's personal pleasure and pain.

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[44]Mahadev Desai, *op. cit.*, p. 67, Cf. Romans 12:1, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God."

[45]B.G. Tilak. *op. cit.*, p. 531, Cf. B.G. VI. I; V. 2; XVII. 12, 23, etc.

[46]*Ibid.*, p. 531.

It is doubtful whether the *Gītā* supports the extension of the scope of *karmaphalatyāga* to all considerations of the consequences of our actions as Tilak is inclined to think. But Tilak says, for example, interpreting the ethics of the *Gītā*, "...It is true that the actions, which the *Sthitaprajña* of the *Gītā* performs by way of duties, are naturally productive of public good. But the *Sthitaprajña* of the *Gītā* does not entertain the egoistical feeling...and all actions which are performed by him purely as duties...are naturally productive of public good."[47] Then Tilak goes on to assert the superiority of the *Gītā* doctrine against the "Western materialistic path of action." As he sees it, the Western system considers worldly life an embodiment of happiness and speaks of actions which would produce better conditions of life for the masses. If a moral philosophy is based only on the attitude towards work, *karmaphalatyāga*, there is a danger of relegating the right-wrong consideration of an action to a secondary stage, as another writer, Kaveeshwar, observes.[48] Sometimes, actions performed without any tinge of egoistic attachment can be morally wrong. Likewise, actions performed with selfish goals can turn out to be beneficial to the public as well as to the author of such actions. Can such an act be condemned as egoistic and therefore morally wrong? Tilak's position on these questions is far from clear.

The Basis of Social Action

The burden of Tilak's commentary on the *Gītā* is to establish the superiority of action over other means of realising the ends of human life. In Tilak's view, all actions are, in one way or another, related to man's social life, and man has no escape from his *dharma* towards society, "The summary of the *Gītā* religion is that...one should enthusiastically perform all the duties...and acquire benefit of the Ātman in the shape of the happiness of all created things."[49] So, broadly speaking, the science of *Karmayoga*, which Tilak expounds at length, forms a basic philosophy of social action. However,

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[47]*Ibid.*, p. 698.
[48]G.W. Kaveeshwar, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
[49]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 698.

we will discuss some aspects of his philosophy of action as they relate to the national ideology and movements with which he was intimately connected at that time.

We have discussed elsewhere Tilak's interpretation of the *Gītā* concept of *lokasaṁgraha*.[50] In relating the *Gītā* concept of service and action to the needs of the India of his time, he is not very explicit. Perhaps this is the most we can expect of a book which was written in a British prison. The book would never have seen the light of day had he expressed his views frankly. He had already been arrested for expressing aspects of his thought derived from the *Gītā*, others were left implicit in the *Gītā-Rahasya*. At a Sivaji memorial meeting in 1897 he exhorted his audience:

> No blame attaches to any person if he is doing deeds without being actuated by a desire to reap the fruit of his deeds. Sri Sivaji...with benevolent intentions...murdered Afzul Khan for the good of others. If thieves enter our house and we have not sufficient strength in our wrists to drive them out, we should without hesitation, shut them up and burn them alive...Do not circumscribe your visions like frogs in a well. Get out of the Penal Code, enter into the extremely high atmosphere of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and then consider the actions of great men.[51]

In several of his writings and speeches Tilak advocated political activism on the basis of the scriptures. It was his belief that the *Gītā*, with its stress on resolute action and steadfast devotion to duty, could be a source of inspiration and courage to the Indian people in their struggle for freedom. As a religious text, the *Gītā* "was able to reconcile the Activism of the early Vedic doctrine with the Quietism of the Upaniṣads by enjoining men to act without seeking the fruits of action."[52]

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[50]Cf. chapter II (pp. 39-40).

[51]Quoted by D. MacKenzie Brown, "The Philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol, XVII, (1957-58), p. 205.

[52]*Ibid.*, p. 199.

We can discern a remarkable sense of history in Tilak's interpretation of the *Gītā*, as opposed to the writings of many Vedantins. He takes the world as it is a reality, though in the ultimate analysis this 'reality' is only relative. It is this philosophy which made him an 'activist' or 'extremist' in the national movement. The following statement becomes significant when we look at it from this angle. He states, "That man who has in this way Realised the Unity of the Ātman pervading all created things, and every atom of whose body and organs is saturated with this knowledge, does not stop to contemplate on the question whether the world is or is not transient, but automatically takes to the work of universal benefit, and becomes the protagonist of Truth."[52] While discussing the question of caste duties, he asserts that the *Gītā* doctrine is meant to be adapted to various times, places, and unusual situations. If the situation demands, one may have to take up a new duty, of one's own free will, and "should be prepared to die in the performance of this duty."[54] Commenting on verse XVIII. 49, Tilak observes that when one has accepted a *dharma* as one's own, "for whatever reason one may have done so, what matters is the frame of mind with which one executes it".[55] Here he is saying, in affect, that historical circumstances are the primary determinant of one's *dharma*, and a man is justified in choosing a new '*dharma*'. Elsewhere he points out that the fourfold order is only a "simple and natural illustration, which applied to the circumstances of that particular age."[56] It is this sense of history that led him to a radical new understanding of his *dharma* in the context of the British rule in India. *Dharma* in that context meant to him a relentless struggle against the British authorities and the forging of a national movement to restore the freedom and the glory of India.

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[53]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 688. Cf. p. 357.

[54]*Ibid.*, p. 935.

[55]*Ibid.*, p. 1198. In a footnote, Tilak's translator writes, "This is difficult to understand. There can be only one reason for accepting the Action, namely, that it is '*śāstra*-ordained' *(nitya)*."

[56]*Ibid.*, p. 697.

The philosophy of Vedanta in the hands of Tilak, become a philosophy of action and involvement. He fought against all interpretations of Vedanta which spread a spirit of passivity and pessimism. According to him, Vedanta does not prescribe the escapist path of withdrawal into introspection and isolation from involvement in active life, but instead provides man with a path which leads to a life of determined action, strengthened through the power of knowledge. He writes, "Having in this way determined what the highest Metaphysical ideal of mankind is the question as to the basis on which one has to perform all the various Actions in this world, or, as to what is the nature of Pure Reason with which those Actions are to be performed,...is *ipso facto* solved."[57] The basis of action, in other words, is the knowledge of the unity of Ātman and Brahman and the awareness that the "immortal and qualityless Ātman-Element saturates fully and eternally both the Body and the Cosmos."[58] It is on this Vedantic basis and in the historical context of the freedom struggle in India, that he exhorted his countrymen "to take such retaliatory action for the purpose of preventing the predominance of wrong-doers and the consequent persecution of the weak in this world."[59] Tilak's speeches and political writings popularised these ideas among the Indian masses. The following statement, at Poona, in 1902, illustrates the radicalism of his political convictions:

You must realise that you are a great factor in the power with which the administration in India is conducted. You are yourselves the useful lubricants which enable the gigantic machinery to work smoothly. Though downtrodden and neglected, you must be conscious of your power of making the administration impossible if you choose to make it so. It is you who manage the railroad and the telegraph, it is you who make the settlements and collect revenues, it is in fact, you who do everything for the administration, though in a subordinate

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[57] *Ibid.*, p. 357.
[58] *loc. cit.*
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 399.

capacity. You must consider whether you can turn your hand to better use for the nation than drudging in this fashion.[60]

It is to be noted that among the national leaders, Tilak was the first to talk about *Swarāj,* self-rule. He spoke in the spirit of the *Gītā* idea of *dharma* when he said, "*Swarāj* is my birthright and I shall have it....Our life and our *Dharma* will be in vain, in the absence of *Swarājya.*" As Damodaran observes, "the attainment of freedom from the British rule was a religious mission for Tilak."[61]

Karmayogaśāstra and the Advaitins

Tilak's interpretation of *Karmayoga* as a direct means to the advaitic realisation, where one sees the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self, which entails action for universal welfare, has not found favour with orthodox Advaitins. We will now discuss some aspects of that Advaita criticism of Tilak's metaphysical system.

The Advaitins follow Śankara's interpretation of the *Gītā* and assert that the path of works is not itself the instrument for attaining the human goal. Man can reach the final goal of release only through *Jñānayoga.*[62] The sole function of *Karmayoga,* the Advaitins hold with Śankara, is the purification of the mind and the preparation to receive wisdom, the wisdom that liberates the *jīva.* In the Vedas, the path of works, *pravṛtti-mārga,* and the path of renunciation were never reconciled. The former was prescribed for those who desire prosperity here and happiness in the hereafter. The path of renunciation offered release for those who long for liberation from transmigratory existence. "The two paths lead to two different goals, one perishable and the other imperishable."[63] But we have to bear in mind that *karma*

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[60]B.G. Tilak, *Writings and Speeches,* edited and published by R.R. Srivastava, Madras (n.d.), p. 77.

[61]K. Damodaran, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

[62]T.M.P. Mahadevan, *The Two-Fold Path in the Gītā,* Madras, 1940, p. 8.

[63]*Ibid,* p. 5.

in the Vedic sense was, in the main, performance of sacrificial rituals. The *Gītā* follows the Upaniṣadic teaching and transforms the Vedic concept of *karma*. As a result, in the *Gītā*, the discrepancy between the two ways has been "removed by making the path of works subservient to and terminating in the higher way" of *Jñāna*.[64] This Advaita interpretation of *karma* runs contrary to Tilak's. For him, *Karmayoga* is the direct path to the final goal, namely, release.

The *Gītā* elevated *karma* from its lower status to that of the respectable role of "purifying the mind and preparing the way of wisdom" by removing the string of egoistic desire. (In the interpretation of the *Mīmāṁsakas*, *karma* was the means of acquiring merit (*puṇya*) and the consequent pleasures of heaven. But, as soon as the stock of *puṇya* is exhausted, one has to return to this world and suffer from the ills of *saṁsāra*). The Advaitins, while maintaining that *Karmayoga* and *Jñānayoga* are not identical and cannot be combined, admit that they are not discontinuous. The former is a first stage in the road to perfection which has to pass through the latter. Tilak's position, that disinterested work is taught by Kṛṣṇa as the one inescapable means of perfection, comes under severe scrutiny by the Advaitins. T.M.P. Mahadevan examines Tilak's position (without mentioning Tilak by name) and comments. "There is much to be said in favour of this view...But still the *Gītāchārya* recognises the fact that *karma* has to stop half-way."[65] He takes a cue from Śankara and argues that the command "Do thou fight (*yudhyasva*)"[66] is really not a command to fight. It refers only to Arjuna's erstwhile resolve, that is, before his delusions were not removed. "Hence the words 'Do thou fight' signify no command, but constitute merely a re-statement."[67] Mahadevan turns to Śankara to reinforce his position and cites the *ācārya*: "The *Gītā-śāstra* is intended to remove the causes of *saṁsāra* such as grief and delusion, and not to enjoin works."[68]

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[64]*Ibid.*, p. 6.
[65]*Ibid.*, p. 10.
[66]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, II. 18.
[67]T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[68]*Ibid.*

Mahadevan contends that if *karma* were obligatory as Tilak holds, then many passages in the *Gītā* would be unintelligible. From an Advaitin's point of view, the very purpose of Kṛṣṇa's teaching was to lead Arjuna to a knowledge of the indestructible self, which is eternal and has neither birth nor death. The problems of temporal existence are insignificant from this lofty angle. In the divine command to "surrender all thy works to me,"[69] Mahadevan sees the "need for renunciation on the part of one who seeks release."[70] It is to be recalled that Tilak understands this call to surrender as a call to get rid of all egoistic desires which may bind one's work. Likewise in verse 49 of chapter eighteen,[71] Mahadevan hears the call for renunciation, "The supreme state of freedom from action is stated to be attained by renunciation."[72] On the other hand, for Tilak, freedom in action and not freedom from action is the message of the *Gītā*. Mahadevan also argues that the *Gītā* declares: "the fire of wisdom consumes all works, and that for him who rejoices in the self there is nothing to do."[73] The orthodox Advaitins interpret Kṛṣṇa's advice, "Unselfish performance of works is better than their renunciation,"[74] not as and exoneration of *Karmayoga*. They maintain that this advice is meant for the ignorant. Arjuna's question concerns only those who have not known the self. As *Karmasannyāsa* can be a dangerous weapon in the hands of the ignorant, Kṛṣṇa prescribes *Karmayoga* for them.

As an Advaitin, Radhakrishnan also follows Śankara's line of thought in general. But he does give greater importance to works than Mahadevan is prepared to concede. He maintains that the *Gītā* does not support an ascetic ethic. "*Naiṣkarmya*, or abstention from actions, is not the true morality, but *niṣkāmata*, or disinterestedness.... Work is

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[69]*Bhagavadgītā*, III. 30.

[70]T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

[71]*asaktabuddiḥ sarvatra jitātmā vigataspṛhaḥ naiṣkarmyasiddhiṁ paramāṁ saṁnyāsenā dhigacchati*, (*Bhagavadgitā*, XVIII. 49).

[72]T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[73]*Ibid.*, p. 13.

[74]*Bhagavadgītā*, V. 2.

inevitable till we attain freedom. We have to work for the sake of freedom, and when we attain it, we have to work as instruments of the divine."[75] We have to be free from all works that bind us. Desireless work is worship of God and it does not bind us. But he does not agree with Tilak that the *Gītā* teaches the superiority of *Karmayoga* to other *yogas* as a means of liberation. He says, "Action performed in the spirit indicated by the *Gītā* finds its completion in wisdom."[76] But *Karmayoga* is an alternative method of approach to the goal which culminates in the wisdom which liberates.[77] According to Radhakrishnan, all the four *yogas*—*Karma, Bhakti, Jñāna* and *Rājayoga*,—are equally efficacious in leading man to his final goal. One has to choose the path on the basis of one's natural inclination, law of being.

Some Advaitins believe that the *Gītā* teaches the combination of all the four *yogas* as the means to liberation. One *yoga* itself will not be an independent means to lead man to his final destiny. As the theme of the *Gītā* develops, each of these four *yogas* are discussed and presented as if it is an independent path. But, in fact, "these seemingly different *yogas* may be said to be various readings of the same phenomenon—the moral and spiritual growth of the individual."[78] Chidbhavananda objects to any gradation of the four *yogas*. He says that the four horses yoked to Kṛṣṇ's chariot symbolise the four *yogas*. "Their combined effort is necessary to draw the chariot forward. All the four *yogas* together stimulate life to spirituality."[79] Some others are of the opinion that it is the combination of works with wisdom (*jñāna-karma-samuccaya*) that leads man to *mukti*. Both these views are rejected by orthodox Advaitins. Mahadevan writes, "Apart from the fact that it is impossible to combine *karma* with knowledge, there is no evidence whatsoever for such a view in the *Gītā*...At the beginning of Chapter II. Sri Kṛṣṇa teaches the way of wisdom

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[75]S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I., p. 568.

[76]*Ibid.*, pp. 571-572.

[77]Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 73.

[78]Swami Chidbhavananda, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 34, Cf. Swami Sivananda, The *Bhagavadgītā*, p. XX-XXI.

[79]Swami Chidbhavananda, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

first and then the way of works. At the beginning of Chapter III Arjuna asks his master why he should engage himself in a horrible war if it was the view of Sri Kṛṣṇa that wisdom is superior to works."[80] This question, as the Advaitin sees it, implies that the author of the *Gītā* teaches two distinct paths, and that *jñāna* is superior to *karma*.

The Advaitins urge a re-interpretation of the *Gītā* verses which seem to support the superiority of *Karmayoga* in a way that sets them in harmony with the entire scheme of the text. Through this reinterpretation of the very verses upon which Tilak himself leans heavily for his science of *Karmayoga*, the Advaitins arrive at a different conclusion. "It is evident that the *Gītā*, while advocating *karma-yoga* as the preparatory means to the dawn of wisdom, does not regard it as the direct instrument of release."[81] The orthodox Advaitins also hold that it is not obligatory to men who have attained perfection to lead an active life. An active and moral life and perfection in the plenary sense of the term are not compatible. *Karma-yoga* as an ethical discipline is useful, but the liberated have already transcended that stage. The following statement of Mahadevan summaries the orthodox Advaitin's stand against Tilak's interpretation of *Karmayoga*. He says:

> The reason why release is unattainable through works is is this. *Mokṣha* is not what is accomplished in time. The end which is called in the *Gītā* by different synonymous names—*mukti, brahma-sthiti, naishkarmya, nistraiguṇya,* and *brahmabhāva*—is not a temporal terminus. It is the realisation of the non-differences between the Absolute and the apparently sundered self. The result of an act may be one of four kinds—origination (*utpatti*), attainment *(prapati),* modification (*vikāra*) and purification (*saṁskara*). The Absolute is eternally attained and devoid of change. It is ever pure and perfect. And so it can never be the fruit of an act. It is ignorance that is the cause of misery and metempsychosis, and *karma* which is but its offspring cannot remove it. It is through delusion by

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[80]T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
[81]*Ibid.*, p. 19.

egoity that man thinks 'I am the doer' (III.27); and this *avidya* cannot be destroyed by *karma*.[82]

Aurobindo, who is not really an orthodox Advaitin, also takes Tilak to task for his tendency "to subordinate its [*Gītā*'s] elements of knowledge and devotion, to take advantage of its continual insistence on action and to find in it a scripture of *Karmayoga*, a light leading us on the path of action, a Gospel of Works."[83] Aurobindo too does not mention Tilak by name. But it is obvious who he has in mind when he attacks the moderns who make the *Gītā* "a Gospel of Works." Aurobindo's view is that the *Gītā* doctrine of works is not an independent and all-sufficient law. Works in the *Gītā*, according to him, are works "which culminate in knowledge, that is, in spiritual realisation and quietude, and of works motivated by devotion, that is, a conscious surrender of one's whole self, first into the hands and then into the being of the Supreme, and not at all works as they are understood by the modern mind, not at all an action dictated by egoistic and altruistic, by personal, social, and humanitarian motives, principles, ideals."[84] He rejects the ideal of disinterested performance of social duties as the central teaching of the *Gītā*. This interpretation of the *Gītā* concept of works, he claims, is telescoping the modern ideal of social service into an ancient book. He also charges that this attempt to make the *Gītā* a text for social activism and service is the result of a European or Europeanized angle of vision. The *Gītā* is not a book of practical ethics, but of spiritual life, according to Aurobindo. He contends that the modern mind—"The modern mind is just now the European mind"—lives in humanity only, while the *Gītā* would have us live in God. "Therefore it is a mistake," argues Aurobindo, "to interpret the *Gītā* from the standpoint of the mentality of today and force it to teach us the disinterested performance of duty as the highest and sufficient law."[85]

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[82] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[83] Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 27.

[84] *loc. cit.*

[85] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Aurobindo strongly asserts that the *Gītā* does not teach the disinterested performance of duties as the highest moral law. On the other hand, "the abandonment of all *Dharmas, sarvadharmān*, to take refuge in the supreme alone, and the divine activity of a Buddha, a Ramakrishna, a Viveknanda is perfectly in consonance" with the teachings of the *Gītā*."[86] In these words one can almost hear the echoes of Aurobindo's own life. He began life as a revolutionary. He was actively involved in the political struggles of India. The British police arrested him in 1908 as an accused in a bomb case, but he was acquitted after a year in jail. Life in the jail changed him and he had a very different outlook when he came out. He went to Pondicherry in 1910 and thus escaped the feared re-arrest. Though his former comrades attempted to persuade him to return to India, he refused saying that he was engaged in a different quest and only after realising that supreme objective could he return to the field of activity.[87] Thus, he gave up all *dharmas* to take refuge in the Supreme. As opposed to this, Tilak stood firm in performing his *dharma*. British prisons did not break his indomitable will. He was active in the field until his death. It was his firm conviction, based on the teachings of the *Gītā*, as he saw it, that through dedicated social action one can reach the supreme goal. When we appraise his *Karma-yoga-śāstra* in the light of his life as a *Karmacāri*, it takes on an added dimension. Besides, in fairness to Tilak, it should be mentioned that he does not negate the efficacy of the other *yogas* of which the *Gītā* teaches. In fact, he believes that the *Gitā* religion fuses the different means of attaining the final goal and establishes a remarkable harmony. Thus, the *Gītā* religion does away with "the mutual conflict between Action, spiritual knowledge (*jñāna*), and Love (Devotion)...and "preaches that the whole of one's life should be turned into a sacrifice (*Yajña*)."[88] Some of the charges levelled against him by the orthodox Advaitins lose their steam in the light of statements like the following. He says:

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[86]*loc. cit.*

[87]Cf. K. Damodaran, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

[88]B.G. Tilak, *op. cit.*, p. 713.

The religion of the *Gītā*, which is a combination of Spiritual Knowledge, Devotion and Action, which is in all aspects undauntable and comprehensive, and is further perfectly equable, that is, which does not maintain any distinction between classes, castes, countries, or any other distinction, but gives Release to everyone in the same measure, and at the same time shows proper forbearance towards other religions, is thus seen to be the sweetest and immortal fruit of the tree of the Vedic Religion.[89]

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[89] *Ibid.*, p. 712.

CHAPTER IV

Two Radical Interpretations from Two Extreme Ends: Gandhi and Aurobindo

Gandhi and Aurobindo were outstanding leaders of the Indian national movement and they influenced the direction of the movement as no other men did in their times, though they were often poles apart in their approach to the problems India faced. Aurobindo, who left India at the tender age of seven for his education in England returned after fourteen years as a fiery nationalist. He belonged to the generation of Indian nationalists who were raised in an essentially Western tradition and had to initiate for themselves the quest for that which was "really" Indian. This quest, led Aurobindo to the grips of Hindu fundamentalism,[1] which moulded his nationalistic ideas. Aurobindo wanted his political programmes to be based on the classical values of Indian philosophy and culture. This he states very clearly in his famous Uttarpara speech: "The Hindu nation was born with *Sanātana Dharma;* with it, it moves, and with it it grows. When *Sanātana Dharma* declines then the nation declines, if *Sanātana Dharma* were capable of perishing with the nation, it would perish. *Sanātana Dharma*, that is nationalism".[2]

Aurobindo plunged into Indian politics without hiding his religious approach to the national issues. For him nationalism "is not a mere political programme, nationalism is a religion that has come from God. Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to live. . . . You must remember that

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[1]Cf. L.I. Rudolph and S.H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition, Political Development in India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1969, p. 168.

[2]Aurobindo Ghose, *Uttarpara Speech*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, (5th ed), 1950, p. 20.

you are the instruments of God".[3] But, Aurobindo who has been indentified with the "extremists" and "radicals" of Indian politics during the period between 1893-1910, retired from active politics abruptly and crossed over to Pondicherry, then the capital of French, India, to devote all his energies to spiritual pursuits. It wa alleged that he went to Pondicherry to escape arrest by the British police. To him, this new move was an act of obedience to the Divine command. In his own words: "While I was listening to the animated comments from those around on the approaching event, [police raid on the *Karmaygin* office] I suddenly received a command from above, in a Voice well known to me, in three words, "Go to Chandernagore". In ten minutes or so I was in the boat for Chandernagore . . . Afterwards, under the same "sailing orders" I left Chandernagore and reached Pondicherry on April 4, 1910".[4] In Pondicherry, he established the *ashram* and shared his new spiritual experiences with his disciples and eventually the rest of the world. For a period of forty years Aurobindo was one of India's great spiritual teachers and Pondicherry became the source of a "new light" for many in India. Among his many works, *Essays on the Gītā*, as K.M. Panikkar points out, has had the greatest influence in shaping the thought of modern India.[5] These essays were originally serialised in his journal *Arya* over a period of four years, had won immediate recognition as a masterly exposition of the permanent truths of the *Gītā* in the context of modern life and in the language of modern thought.

Gandhi entered the Indian national movement in 1915 as a seasoned politician, with his long experience in South Africa as the leader of the immigrant Indians, who were discriminated against by the racist white government there. Gandhi, more than any other national leader, was conscious of the strength and vitality of the masses and their role in making history. "Through his intimate contact with them,

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[3]Aurobindo Ghose, *Speeches*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, (3rd ed), 1952, p. 6.

[4]Aurobindo Ghose, *Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1952, p. 95-96.

[5]Cf. K.M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of New India*, p. 45.

he had acquired an amazing capacity to feel their pulse and respond to their emotions".[6] This was an advantage Gandhi had over Aurobindo and many other national leaders, who represented the English-educated middle class. Soon after his return to India, Gandhi founded the *ashram* at Sabarmati, in Gujarat, to train volunteers for practising the ideals and method of *satyāgraha*, passive moral resistance, which he applied successfully against the discriminatory policies of the South African government. For many years, Sabarmati Ashram was the symbol of the new vitality and dynamism which Gandhi brought into Indian politics.

Gandhi and the Gītā

Gandhi's approach to the national issues was basically "religious". But to him, "religious" had a wider meaning than it had for Tilak, Aurobindo and others. Surely, Gandhi used religious symbols and terminology to communicate his ideas to the masses. This was the only way open to him to present his ideas "in forms comprehensible to the Indian masses, whose support the leaders could not afford to ignore".[7] Unlike his predecessors Gandhi was successful in leavening traditional religious symbolisms with reformist ideas, and tried to find symbols and issues that would avoid communal confrontations. In this attempt even if he did not fully succeed, "he did distinguish himself from his predecessors by infusing these inherited elements with the exceptionally compelling remorseless moral vision of a 'religious'".[8]

Gandhi was deeply religious from childhood and, apart from the teachings of Hinduism, the ethical ideals of Islam, Christianity and Jainism influenced him in the formative years of his life. All his political activities were guided by his spiritual concerns. Nehru, to whom Gandhi was a great paradox, characterizes the spiritual and moral concerns of Gandhi in the following words: "He does not want people to make an ideal of over-increasing comfort and leisure,

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[6]K. Damodaran, *op. cit* , p. 435.

[7]Indira Rothermund, *The Philosophy of Restraint*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1963, p. 16.

[8]L.I. Rudolph & S.H. Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

but to think of the moral life, give up their bad habits, to indulge themselves less and less, and then to develop themselves individually and spiritually".[9] So much so, one finds Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, something like the "Confussions" of a saint. The struggle which echoes in this great book, is a struggle to integrate his private life with what he preached to the nation. It is from these "experiments in the spiritual field", Gandhi states, "which are known only to myself, and from which I have derived such power as I possess for working in the political field".[10]

There was an openness in Gandhi's approach to the *Gītā* which we seldom see in other commentators. This openness is displayed in his approach to scriptures in general. He writes: "I exercise my judgement about every scripture, including the *Gītā*. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. While I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation.... Nothing in them comes from God directly".[11] Unlike many orthodox Hindus, he holds that even in the Vedas there are impurities and "they (the Vedas) contain only fragments of the originals".[12] He did not regard the *Mahābhārata* as a historical work in the accepted sense. He writes: "By ascribing to the chief actors superhuman or subhuman origins, the great Vyasa made short work of the history of Kings and their peoples. The persons therein described may be historical, but the author of the *Mahābhārata* has used them merely to drive home his religious theme"[13] Gandhi's Gujarati translation of the *Gītā*, titled *Anāsaktiyoga*, and his commentary bear witness to this approach to the *Gītā* and other scriptures. To him, scriptures, Hindu or other, "can only be concerned with eternal varieties and must appeal to any con-

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[9]J. Nehru, *Autobiography*, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1962, pp. 517-18.

[10]M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1965, p. xii.

[11]*Harijan*, December 5, 1936.

[12]M.K. Gandhi, *The Teaching of the Gītā*, p. 44.

[13]*Ibid.*, 19.

science, that is any heart whose eyes of understanding are opened. Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason or be capable of being spiritually experienced".[14] Obviously he gave more importance to the latter, for he says elsewhere, "....one's experience, therefore, must be the final guide. The written word undoubtedly helps, but even that has to be interpreted, and when there are conflicting interpretations, the seeker is the final arbiter".[15]

It is rather surprising that even though his family was very religious, Gandhi had no acquaintance with the *Gītā* in his early youth. He read this great text, which was to become his "eternal mother" and "solace" in later years, in English translation with theosophist friends in England for the first time. He was constrained to tell them that he had not read the *Gītā* before. The book struck him as one of priceless worth. He writes of this first reading of the *Gītā* in his autobiography as a great spiritual experience. He writes, "The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book *par excellence* for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded me invaluable help in moments of gloom."[16] He studied and meditated on the *Gītā* for several years; and he would write later, "it has become for me the key to the scriptures of the world. It unravels for me the deepest mysteries to be found in them".[17] He gave greater importance to the *Gītā* than even the Vedas, which to an orthodox Hindu is the "revealed word". He states, "I do believe in the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the *Smṛti*, the Puraṇas. But to me, the *Gītā* is the key to a knowledge of the *Śāstras*. It enunciates the principles on which all conduct must be based. It sums up the whole of the Śāstras and, therefore, absolves laymen from having to explore the other books".[18]

In a lengthy article in his journal *Harijan*, Gandhi explains why he considers the *Gītā* as the greatest religious text. He writes:

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[14]M.K. Gandhi, *All Religions are True*, Pearl Publications, Bombay, 1962, p. 22.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 20.

[16]M.K. Gandhi. *An Autobiography*, p. 67.

[17]M.K. Gandhi, *The Teaching of the Gītā*, p. 44.

[18]*loc. cit.*

> Early in my childhood, I had felt the need for a scripture that would serve me as an unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life. The Vedas could not supply that need...But the *Gītā*...gave within the compass of 700 verses the quintessence of all the Shastras and Upanishads. That decided for me. I learnt Sanskrit to enable me to read the *Gītā*. Today, the *Gītā* is not only my Bible or my Quran, it is more than that—it is my Mother. I lost my earthly mother who gave me birth long ago, but this Eternal Mother has completely filled her place by my side ever since.[19]

In this kind of approach, there is a characteristic Gandhian sentiment, which he did not forsake even in reference to political issues. Nehru was impatient with Gandhi for this, which he considered a weakness. Writes Nehru in his autobiography: "I felt angry with him (Gandhi) at his religious and sentimental approach to a political question, and his frequent reference to God in connection with it. He even seemed to suggest that God had indicated the very date of the fast".[20] But that was the way of the Mahatma, as people of India called him. For a clear understanding of Gandhi's approach and freer interpretation of the *Gītā*, we have to look at his religious philosophy as a whole and his political actions that had their fount in the former.

Gandhi was essentially a religious man, a Hindu "to the innermost depths of his being".[21] But his conception of religion was not dogmatic. He rejected every text or practice which did not fit in with his idealistic interpretation of what it should be, calling it an interpolation or a subsequent accretion. He expresses this emphatically: "I decline to be a slave to precedents or practice I cannot understand or defend on a moral basis".[22] God, for him, is the moral principle, which he calls the "Law of Truth or Love". In his own words, "To me God is truth and love. God is ethics and morality,

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[19]*Ibid.*, p. 45.

[20]J. Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 370.

[21]J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, John Day, New York, 1946, p. 365.

[22]Quoted by J. Nehru, *loc. cit.*

God is fearlessness, God is the source of light and life, and all the same He is higher than and beyond all these."[23] Throughout his writings, this conviction echoes and gradually he began to speak of truth as God. Love of man was the only way to realise the truth. Tendulkar quotes him as saying, "When you want to find Truth as God, the only inevitable means is love, that is, non-violence. And since I believe that ultimately means and ends are convertible terms, I should not hesitate to say that God is Love".[24] This interpretation of "Truth as God" had a great impact on the national movement as a whole, and behind it lies "the old pedantic ideal of the life force which is the inner base of everything that exists".[25] Gandhi's understanding of "truth" as the source of life and his insistence that it can be realized only if one lives by it, is really in the Vedantic tradition of India. It was, in many ways, an attempt to re-grasp and re-interpret the Hindu tradition for Twentieth Century India.

The Hindu tradition holds out to man the possibility of ultimate realization of the absolute: the consummation of man's strivings in his identification with the Godhead. This is the basic idea of "self-realization" in the system of Vedanta philosophy. For Gandhi, this striving for self-realization was really the search for truth. This he clearly states in his introduction to his autobiography. He writes:

> There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest...But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must meanwhile be my beacon, my shield and buckler.[26]

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[23]M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, March 3, 1925.

[24]D.G. Tendulkar, *The Mahatma*, Jhaveri & Tendulkar, Bombay, 1952, Vol. 2, p. 312.

[25]J. Nehru, *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 7, 1958.

[26]M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. xiii-xiv.

The two basic techniques of his political action—*satyāgraha* and *ahiṁsā*—were based on this understanding of truth. "*Satyāgraha* is literally holding on to Truth, and it means therefore Truth-force." How does it become a "force" and how does it relate to man's action in the field of conflict? Gandhi answers: "It excludes the use of violence, because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and therefore not competent to punish".[27] For Gandhi, the techniques of his political action and his religious philosophy developed side by side. Both of them evolved in the field of action. In other words, his ontological or epistemological statements were developed, as J.V. Bondurant observes, "in the course of his action in the field of human interrelationships. As Gandhi pursued his experiments with truth, the concept settled solidly into the sphere of ethical consideration".[28] He was fully convinced that spiritual law does not work in a field of its own. "On the contrary" he writes, "it expresses itself through ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and the political fields."[29]

In the Upaniṣads we have the ontological equation *satya-Brahman*[30] and Gandhi's expression "Truth is God" is the unconscious translation of this Upaniṣadic teaching into everyday language. "*Sat*", or the essence, that is the being within, is the transindividual Self, the Brahman, according to the Upaniṣads. The *Chandogya* formula, "*tat tvam asi* (that thou art) has been assimilated into Gandhi's understanding of God and truth. In a letter to a friend he explains his view:

> In "God is Truth", it certainly does not mean "equal to" nor does it merely mean, "is truthful". Truth is not a mere attribute of God, but He is That. He is nothing if He is not That. Truth in Sanskrit means *Sat*. *Sat* means *Is*. Therefore Truth is implied in *Is*. God is, nothing else

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[27]M.K. Gandhi, *Speeches & Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Natesan, Madras, 4th. ed. (n.d.) p. 506.

[28]J.V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1965, p. 19.

[29]Quoted by Indira Rothermund, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

[30]"He who knows Brahma as the real [Satya]...Obtains all desires" (*The Taittirya Upaniṣad*, I. 1).

is. Therefore the more truthful we are, the nearer we are to God. We are only to the extent that we are truthful.[31]

This statement clearly shows that Gandhi was not concerned with abstract ideas about God. For him, God is the source of ethics and morality. "He transcends speech and reason". At the same time "He is a personal God to those who need His touch".[32] "God to be God", says he, "must rule the heart and transform it".[33] Religion means to accept God for life, as Dutta summarizes Gandhi's thought.

Gandhi's definition of Hinduism as a "search after truth through non-violent means"[34] is very significant and the doctrines of *satya* (truth) and *ahiṁsā* (love) became the basis of his political and religious philosophy. In the formulation and application of his philosophy, he "used the traditional to promote the novel" and he reinterpreted the religious texts and traditions "in such a way that revolutionary ideas clothed in familiar expression, were readily adopted and employed towards revolutionary ends".[35] People of India readily responded to Gandhi's call for political action, because his language was very familiar to them. Through the traditional precepts such as *satya*, *ahiṁsā*, Gandhi successfully introduced "considerations unfamiliar to Indian tradition and reminiscent of the rationalist-humanist traditions of the West".[36] In this re-interpretation of the religious texts in order to drive home his ideas, Gandhi leaned more heavily on the *Gītā* than on any other text. He declares so himself in his introduction to *Anāsaktiyoga*, in these words: "...I have felt that in trying to enforce in one's life the central teaching

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[31]From a letter to P.G. Mathew, July 9, 1932, as quoted in *Harijan*, March 27, 1949, p. 26.

[32]*Young India*, March 3, 1925, Quoted by D.M. Dutta, *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1953, p. 30.

[33]*Ibid.*, p. 42.

[34]*Young India*, April 24, 1924, Quoted by Indira Rothermund, *op. cit.*, p. 4o.

[35]J.V. Bondurant, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

[36]*Ibid.*, p. 108.

of the *Gītā*, one is bound to follow Truth and *ahiṁsā*".[37] He was also convinced that a reverent study of the *Gītā* will help people to become true servants of the nation and through it, of humanity.[38] It was this condition that led him to a free interpretation of the text, giving greater emphasis to spiritual experience than to the literal meaning of the text.

Orthodox Hindu scholars viewed Gandhi's interpretation of the traditional texts, especially the *Gītā*, with suspicion and regarded his understanding of orthodoxy with doubt. But he has declared in no uncertain terms his allegiance to Hinduism, in words such as these: "...As for religion, in order to satisfy the requirements of the definition, I must restrict myself to my ancestral religion. This is the use of my immediate religious surrounding. It I find it defective, I should serve it by purging it of its defects".[39] Purging Hinduism of many of its defects he did attempt. Besides, he was prepared to impart new meanings which are relevant to the times into traditional concepts. He gives a very pertinent interpretation of the progressive development and transformation of meanings to meet new situations. He writes:

> A poet's meaning is limitless. Like man, the meaning of great writings suffer evolution. On examining the history of languages, we notice that the meaning of important words has changed or expanded. This is true of the *Gītā*. The author has himself extended the meanings of some of the current words. We are able to discover this even on a superficial examination. It is possible that in the age prior to that of the *Gītā*, offering of animals as sacrifice was permissible. In the *Gītā* continuous concentration on God is the King of sacrifices. The third chapter seems to show that sacrifice chiefly means body-labour for service. The third and fourth chapters read together will give us other meanings of sacrifice, but never animal sacrifice....Thus the author of the *Gītā*, by extending meaning of words has taught us to imitate him. Let it be granted, that

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[37]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 132.
[38]Cf. M.K. Gandhi, *The Teaching of the Gītā*, p. 40.
[39]M.K. Gandhi, *Speeches & Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 337.

according to the letter of the *Gītā* it is possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after forty years' unremitting endeavour fully to enforce the teaching of the *Gītā* in my own life, I have in all humility, felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of *ahiṁsa* in every shape and form.[40]

In the *Gītā* doctrine of non-attachment, Gandhi discovered the meaning of *ahiṁsā* and *satya*. He also found elements of *satyāgraha*, his political weapon to reduce the grievances of the people in the scriptures.

Gītā—The Text for Ahiṁsā

The context of the *Gītā* is martial and all the commentators of the *Gītā* are at one in admitting this, whether one holds the context as a historical event or a purely literary creation. On the surface, it may look rather paradoxical that Gandhi found this text as the fountain of the doctrine of *ahiṁsā*. As Vincent Sheean observes, "...we have to step with care as we approach"[41] Gandhi's interpretation and application of the *Gītā* in his everyday life as well as the political activities he led. He was not another scholar who attempted his own translation and commentary of this text. His was an endeavour "to reduce to practice the teaching of the *Gītā* as I have understood it".[42] The claim he makes with respect to the *Gītā*, is the claim of his life itself. He had made the *Gītā* "a spiritual reference book" and has accepted its ethical basis and spiritual disciplines. So, he writes with the authority of one who has lived up to the message of the text, "At the back of my reading there is the claim of an endeavour to enforce the meaning in my own conduct for an unbroken period of forty years".[43] His study and practice of the precepts of the *Gītā* were the means he has adopted for self-realization. "And with him", writes Sheean, "...self-realization was no mythical revelation or cataclysm

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[40]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of the Selfless Action, p. 133-134.*

[41]Vincent Sheean, *Lead Kindly Light*, Random House, New York, 1949, p. 49.

[42]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 126.

[43]*Ibid.*, p. 127.

of the consciousness, but a goal to be reached after a lifetime of steady, hard, unremitting effort".[44]

This struggle for self-realization was not an isolated struggle of his own soul but a struggle along with millions of his compatriots. The rigorous discipline he imposed upon himself and his followers, and the renunciation of the body and all its attachments, combined with the strictest control of his own thoughts were themselves an unceasing battle. This inner struggle must have led Gandhi to believe that Kurukṣetra, the field where the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas took place, is the symbolic re-presentation of the human heart. Most of the scholars do not agree with Gandhi's symbolic interpretation of the *Gītā*. But, his rendering of the *Gītā* was for the common people and it has a great impact on the lives of many Indians. The Indian national movement which had deep roots in Hinduism, itself to a great extent was influenced by Gandhi's concept of *ahiṁsā*, in general, and his interpretation of the *Gītā* in particular. Sheean gives a very telling analogy to drive home '*Gandhi-Gītā's*' influence on the Indian people. He writes: "...but if we could imagine a national leader, social reformer and political genius with the personal habits of Francis of Assisi existing in a Christian country, and could further imagine that this unique personage insisted daily for forty or fifty years on a textual knowledge of the New Testament in the original Greek as well as in modern languages, succeeding in some measure, then we might have a notion of what Gandhi in relation to *Gītā* has meant in India".[45]

Gandhi approaches the *Gītā* and the *Mahābhārāta* from a totally different perspective than the traditional commentators. He holds firmly that *Mahābhārata* (and therefore the *Gītā*) is not a historical book and the Kṛṣṇa of the epic is not a historical person. He writes: "...Krishna of the *Gītā* is perfection and right knowledge personified, but the picture is imaginary. That does not mean that Krishna, the adored of his people, never lived. But perfection is imagined. The

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[44]Vincent Sheean, *op. cit.*, p. 49,
[45]*Ibid.*, p. 296.

idea of a perfect imagination is an aftergrowth".[46] This was undoubtedly a bold step in the interpretation and application of religious texts in the Indian context. When the literal approach to the text was abandoned, new vistas were wide open and that helped Gandhi to free himself from the traditional modes of interpretation, without doing violence to the genuine core of the tradition. Gandhi admits boldly that he had to evolve his own canons of interpretation. His was not one that evolved from the science of reasoning, but from intuition on which he leaned heavily. He says: "...I know that ultimately one is guided not by the intellect, but by the heart. The heart accepts a conclusion for which the intellect subsequently finds the reasoning...I shall, therefore, appreciate the position of those who are unable to accept my interpretation of the *Gītā*. All I need to do is indicate how I reached my meaning, and what canons of interpretation I have followed in arriving at it. Mine is but to fight for my meaning, no matter whether I win or lose."[47] He also maintains that "a literal interpretation of the *Gītā* lands one in a sea of contradictions. The letter truly killeth, the spirit giveth life".[48]

The "new canon" of interpreting the *Gītā* gives greater freedom to Gandhi. It is logical for him to interpret symbolically, the descriptions of and exhortations to physical warfare. He sees the Pandavas as the symbol of light and Kauravas as that of darkness. The descriptions of Kurukṣetra represent for Gandhi, the incompatability of light and darkness. To bring home his concept of "non-co-operation", which was a powerful political weapon against the British, he writes: "I venture to suggest that the *Bhagavadgītā* is a Gospel of non-co-operation between the forces of darkness and those of light."[49] The predicament of Arjuna in the battlefield is the predicament of every man who quails, "when the dividing line between good and evil is thin and

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[46]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 128.
[47]M.K. Gandhi, *The Teaching of the Gītā*, p. 11.
[48]*Ibid.*, p. 4.
[49]*loc. cit.*,

the right choice is so difficult."[50] He points out that the author of the *Mahābhārata* has not in any way established the necessity of physical warfare but "on the contrary he has proved its futility".[51] The *Gītā* was not written to inculcate the doctrine of *ahiṁsā*, Gandhi freely admits. In his understanding, *ahiṃsā* "was an accepted and primary duty even before the *Gīta* age."[52] He holds that warlike illustrations are used in the *Gītā* not because the author of the *Gītā* condones violence, but because during that period "nobody observed the contradiction between them (wars) and *ahiṁsā*"[53]

Ahiṁsā literally means "non-injury" or "non-killing". The term "non-violence" carries the spirit of the concept more than any other English term. ('*Ahiṁsā*' is one of those innumerable Sanskrit negatives which carries a very positive meaning). The early Christian concept of love comes closer to Gandhi's idea of *ahiṁsā* than any other. Gandhi never claimed that the concept of *ahiṁsā* he brought into the social and political movements of India was something new. In fact, the concept was as old as the Vedas. The *Chandogya Upaniṣad* lists *ahiṁsā* as one of the five ethical virtues.[54] *Mahābhārata* couples the aphorism, *ahiṁsā paramo dharmaḥ* (*ahiṁsā* is the greatest religion or duty) with *satyannasti paro dharmaḥ* (there is no religion greater than truth). This aphorism is learnt by every Indian along with stories from Buddhist and Jaina literature illustrating the significance of *ahiṁsā*. Gandhi, who grew up in Gujarat where the Jainas had great influence, was in love with these teachings from his childhood. For the Jainas, *ahiṁsā* constitutes the first vow and their adherence to non-violence reaches extremes in their attitude to other living creatures. In spite of these influences, Gandhi claims a degree of freedom from the religious traditions and texts which moulded his outlook. He writes:

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[50]*Young India*, May 7, 1925.

[51]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 128.

[52]*Ibid.*, p. 132.

[53]*Ibid.*, p. 133.

[54]*Atha yat tapo dānaṁ ārjavaṁ ahiṁsā satyavacanam iti. ta asya dakṣinaḥ, (Chandogya Upaniṣad, III.17.4).*

"...though my views on *ahiṁsā* are a result of my study of most of the faiths of the world, they are no longer dependent upon the authority of these works. They are a part of my life, and if I suddenly discovered that the religious books read by me bore a different interpretation from the one I had learnt to give them, I should still hold to the view of *ahiṁsā*".[55] This statement is typical of Gandhi's attitude towards the authority of religious texts. Taking a firm stand on this position, he rejects the traditional interpretations of the *Gītā* and claims that a closer study of the text reveals that it does not refer to any physical warfare. On the other hand, Gandhi insists that non-violence, rather than violence is the central theme of the *Gītā*. He asserts that the "whole design (of the *Gītā*) is inconsistent with the rules of conduct governing the relations between two warring parties".[56] Taking into account the contention that Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna to carry on the battle, Gandhi admits, "...it is difficult to reconcile certain verses with the teaching of non-violence". But, he hastens to add "...it is far more difficult to set the whole of the *Gītā* in the framework of violence".[57]

Gandhi maintains the view that the central teaching of the *Gītā* is *ahiṁsā*. He arrives at this conclusion not only from the symbolic interpretation of the context in which the discourses are given but also from the nature of the advice given by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna. He writes:

> The central teaching of the *Gītā* is not *Hiṁsā* but *Ahiṁsā*, is amply demonstrated by the subject begun in the Second Chapter and summarized in the concluding Eighteenth Chapter. The treatment in other chapters also supports this position. *Hiṁsā* is impossible without anger, without attachment, without hatred, and the *Gītā* strives to carry us to the state beyond *Satva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*, a stage that excludes anger, hatred etc.[58]

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[55]M.K. Gandhi, *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 345.
[56]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 128.
[57]M.K. Gandhi, *The Teaching of the Gītā*, p. 16.
[58]*loc. cit.*,

According to Gandhi, Arjuna refused to fight because of his attachment to his relatives. "He fought shy of killing his own kith and kin".[59] Arjuna was still a warrior and he did not accept the principle of *ahiṁsā*, though he was aware of the cruelty of war. Arjuna's predicament was never centred on the question of *ahiṁsā* and as such Kṛṣṇa read his mind and admonished him to be loyal to his *dharma*. "He, therefore told him: 'Thou hast already done the killing. Thou canst not all at once argue thyself into non-violence. Finish what thou hast already begun' ".[60] Gandhi does not consider this advice as opposed to the principle of non-violence. To do so would amount to saying that *hiṁsā* is the law of life. Gandhi has utmost conviction that "To one who reads the spirit of the *Gītā*, it teaches the secret of non-violence, the secret of realizing the Self through the physical body".[61]

In his introduction to the commentary on the *Gītā* Gandhi states clearly that renunciation of the fruits of action"...is the centre round which the *Gītā* is woven. This renunciation is the central sun, round which devotion, knowledge and the rest revolve like planets".[62] This is the way the *Gītā* shows to reach the final goal of liberation. But Gandhi is aware that the human mind is incapable of absolute detachment to the fruits of action unless there is an attachment to a higher principle. This higher principle, according to Gandhi is *ahiṁsā*. When man gives up his desire for the fruits of his actions, there shall be no temptation for untruth or *hiṁsā*. "Take any instance of untruth or violence", writes Gandhi, "and it will be found that at its back was the desire to attain the cherished end."[63] This does not in any way mean that one should be totally indifferent to the results of his actions. What the *Gītā* is concerned with is the "hankering after fruit". The path of renunciation of the fruit is the path of salvation according to the *Gītā*. "Performing action without attachment, man attains the Supreme".[64]

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[59]*Ibid.*, p. 17.
[60]*loc. cit.*
[61]*loc. cit.*
[62]*Ibid.*, p. 20.
[63]M.K. Gandhi, *Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 129.
[64]*Ibid* , 132.

The *Gītā's* exhortation to perform actions without desire for the fruits thereof does not involve the idea of "all absence of purpose". Gandhi shows that, on the other hand, there is a supreme purpose for this renunciation. That purpose is self-realization or attaining the Final Release.[65] This is the true meaning of the *yoga* of action as well as the *yoga* of knowledge. Gandhi would agree with Zaehner when he says, "Wisdom, then amounts to detachment from all that is transient and a loving attachment of the immortal self to God, for in that both self and God are eternal, they coincide in that both are ultimately not bound by space, time, action and causation".[66]

When a visitor asked Gandhi whether he would consider *ahiṁsā* or selfless action as the central theme of the *Gītā*, he admitted that selfless action is undoubtedly the central theme.[67] The very title of Gandhi's translation of the *Gītā*—*Anāsaktiyoga*—means this. But Gandhi, after stating this, added "He who would be *Anāsakta* (selfless) has necessarily to practise non-violence to attain the state of selflessness. *Ahiṁsā* is, therefore, a necessary preliminary, it is included in *Anāsakti*, it does not go beyond it".[68] Gandhi's concept of *ahiṁsā* takes a wider and deeper meaning when we see it in this light as a force which transcends the very fabric of human relationships, a force which compels one to act and think beyond the immediate range of one's narrow world. It is a dynamic force which in the experience of Gandhi, seeks to change relationships that are evil into good and acts as a bridge to bridge every division. For him the principle of non-violence "implies as complete self-purification as is humanly possible".[69] Gandhi argues that *yajña* or sacrifice as taught by the Vedas essentially means this self-purification. The *Gītā* enjoins sacrifice to the gods and promises rewards to those

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[65]Cf. M.K Gandhi, *Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 161.

[66]R.C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgītā*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1969, p. 162.

[67]M.K. Gandhi, *The Teaching of the Gītā*, p. 33.

[68]*loc. cit.*,

[69]Quoted by Thomas Merton in *Gandhi on Non-violence*, New Directions, New York, 1965, p. 24.

who perform the right sacrifices. Gandhi draws a very logical conclusion from this teaching, as opposed to the conventional interpretation. He writes, "To proceed a little further, sacrifice means laying down one's life so that others may live. Let us suffer, so that others may be happy, and the highest service and the highest love is wherein man lays down his life for his fellowmen. That love is thus *Ahiṁsā* which is the highest service."[70]

If there is an air of dogmatism in Gandhian philosophy it is in his insistence on *ahiṁsā*. The validity of any action for Gandhi, even the question of truth itself, has to be decided in relation to *ahiṁsā*. *Ahiṁsā* becomes the supreme value, one cognizable standard by which true action can be determined, when it is seen as the "law of our being". At that stage, the test of truth—the relative truths through which one treads to the final Truth—is action based on the refusal to do harm. This is the one principle to which Gandhi adhered to the end, in the life of his *ashram* community. He held, as Bondurant observes, that *ahiṁsā* is "the supreme and only way to the discovery of social truths".[71] This evolution of the concept of *ahiṁsā* is a natural culmination of Gandhi's religious philosophy which sees "all life as one in a sacred cosmic family in which each member helped to elevate the whole from a selfish and destructive to a spiritual and productive level through sacrificial participation in the common needs and struggles of all".[72] In this, we see a remarkable blending of his political ideas with his understanding of the Hindu *dharma*.

Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gītā*, as it turns out in the final analysis, is an honest attempt to augment his religious intentions with the support of scripture. He tried to fulfil in his own life the message of the *Gītā* as he understood it. As K.M. Panikkar observes, "He was in fact the embodiment of the *Gītā* ideal of the equable mind devoted to action meant for the benefit of all—the *sthitiprajña* who unmoved by anger or by fear had his feet planted firmly in the world and

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[70]M.K. Gandhi, *Teaching of the Gītā*, p. 57.
[71]Joan V. Bondurant, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
[72]Thomas Merton, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

directed all action to the benefit of the world".[73] He was a *karmayogin* and *The Gītā According to Gandhi,* was his manifesto. In the words of Vincent Sheean: "His interpretation of it (the *Gītā*) therefore, in terms of non-violence acquires the value of life rather than literature. He lived the *Gītā* in non-violent terms. That was his interpretation and he proved it by his hero's death. Just as life transcends letters, so Gandhi-*Gītā* triumphs over the unanimous dissent of the scholars by the dramatic perfection of the life given to it."[74]

Sri Aurobindo and the Yoga of the Gītā

Aurobindo's interpretation of the *Gītā* is far different from Gandhi's, as Pondicherry Ashram, the centre of his spiritual activities, was separated from Gandhi's Sabarmati by hundreds of miles. He does not see Kurkṣetra as a symbolic battleground, but as a literal field of strife, of physical carnage and holds that the entire *Gītā* proceeds from a concept of nature in which such violent strife is seen to be necessary as an aspect of human activity in general. He writes, "It is self-evident that in the actual life of man, social, political, moral, we can make no real step forward without a struggle, a battle between what exists and lives and what seeks to exist and live and between all that stands behind either."[75] In these words we hear the echo of the political slogans of the "extremist" Aurobindo who left British India for Pondicherry in order to formulate a spiritual basis for the liberation of his motherland. Non-violence had no place in his philosophy. The moralism of the man who preaches love, according to Aurobindo, ignores the fact of life that "Love itself has been constantly a power of death. Especially the love of good and the love of God, as embraced by the human ego, have been responsible for much strife, slaughter and destruction."[76] He upholds Hinduism as a religion with great courage to admit "without any reserve...that this enigmatic World-Power is one Deity, one Trinity, to lift up

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[73]K.M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of New India*, p. 44.
[74]V. Sheean, *op. cit.*, p. 298.
[75]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 38.
[76]*Ibid.*, p. 39.

the image of the Force that acts in this world in the figure not only of the benefient Durga, but of the terrible Kali in her blood-stained dance of destruction."[77]

It is beyond the scope of our study to attempt an exposition of Aurobindo's philosophy and place his interpretation of the *Gītā* in that context. What is proposed here is only to bring out certain salient features of his interpretation and examine their relation to the religious and national movements of which he was a leader. Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gītā* is "primarily a work of religion" as K.M. Panikkar observes, "but in view of the author's training and background it has had a wide social significance."[78] This commentary is not a *bhāṣya* in the traditional sense, but an exposition of truths of the *Gītā* which are relevant to modern times. In it, we see the gems of Aurobindo's religious philosophy, which has become known in later years as "Integral Advaitism" and "Integral Yoga". We may also observe that the fiery nationalist in him was very much alive when he wrote these essays. Aurobindo exhorts his readers by stating that the *Gītā* is addressed to the fighter, whose duty is that of war and protection, that is protection of right and justice.[79] He goes on to say "...but to battle for the right is his (the Aryan fighter's) true object of life and to find a cause for which he can lay down his life or by victory win the crown and glory of the hero's existence is his greater happiness."[80] In the context of the Indian national struggle, the meaning of these statements are very clear. These expositions of the *Gītā* are really mild, spiritualised versions of the political ideas which he promoted vehemently. He has advocated passive resistance only as a tactical step and did not hide his real opinion on the subject. He writes:

> Under certain circumstances a civil struggle becomes in reality a battle and the morality of war is different from the morality of peace. To shrink from bloodshed and

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[77]*Ibid.*, p. 40.
[78]K.M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of New India*, p. 45.
[79]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 44.
[80]*Ibid.*, p. 58.

violence under such circumstances is a weakness deserving as severe a rebuke as Sri Krishna addressed to Arjuna when he shrank from the colossal civil slaughter on the field of Kurukshetra. Liberty is the life-breath of a nation, and when the life is attacked...any and every means of self-preservation becomes right and justifiable.[81]

Although Aurobindo is steeped in love of ancient and medieval India, his philosophy gives an altogether new meaning to the conception of *Yoga*. He has enlarged the scope of *Yoga* as never before and this ancient discipline which used to mean "negative repression" of the mental activity of man has attained a new significance. For Aurobindo, "All *Yoga* is a seeking after the Divine, a turn towards union with the Eternal."[82] This union is the supreme purpose of life as taught by the *Gītā*, according to Aurobindo. Here lies the positive aspect of Aurobindo's exposition of the *Yoga*. He shows clearly in his writings on the *Yoga* that a balance and harmony of social obligation *vis-a-vis* self-realisation is the highest aim of life and whoever is conscious of this implication of *Yoga* is in fact conscious that *Yoga* really means "abundant life", to borrow a biblical (Johannine) expression. He says, "For man is precisely that term and symbol of a higher Existence descended into a material world in which it is possible for the lower to transfigure itself and put on the nature of the higher and the higher to reveal itself in the forms of the lower."[83] Aurobindo visualised the entire creation as a *Yoga* in a grand and gigantic scale. Personal *Yoga* of the individual is the only method in which an understanding or rapport with the *Yoga* in nature can be established. To him "all life is consciously or unconsciously a *Yoga*."[84] He called his system "Integral *Yoga*" because he viewed the entire creation as being interconnected. Only a real *Yogi* can understand this interrelation, through which he himself

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[81]Quoted by Karan Singh in *Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1963, p. 100.

[82]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 308.

[83]Aurobindo Ghose, *On Yoga*, Aurobindo International University Centre, Pondicherry, 1958, p. 7.

[84]*Ibid.*, p. 4.

feels related to everything else. It is an ascent to a higher plane where one grasps the "unitive knowledge embracing both God and the universe" and forms the bar and root of final salvation, which means ultimately the healing of the world and healing means making whole.[85]

Aurobindo's 'integral Yoga', as R.C. Zaehner observes, aimed not only "at the discovery of the immortal and timeless within oneself but also sought to harmonize the total human being in and around this immortal core and then concentrate all immortal cores or centres around the core and centre of all things."[86] 'Integral Yoga', conceived on these lines had to make a break with the traditional *Sāṁkhya-Yoga* and even with Patanjali's classical *Rāja Yoga*. The *Gītā* provided Aurobindo with the basic principles for a great synthesis of all *Yogas*, which were rooted in the classic tradition of India. Aurobindo also gave a social content to the concept of *Yoga*. *Yoga* for him is not an individual affair, though the part one plays might for a time be considered very intimate and personal. His concept "progressively developed into *Yoga* for humanity and ultimately identified itself with universal *Yoga*."[87] This universal *Yoga* is integral and synthetic at the same time and it aims at the divinization of the human being. Aurobindo promises the emancipation of the human race through *Yoga* and emancipation lies in divinising "the whole of humanity by transforming mind, life and matter."[88]

The *Essays on the Gītā* contains the first stage of Aurobindo's "integral *Yoga*" which he systematically developed through later works. In these essays, his major burden seems to be a reconciliation and synthesis between different types of *yogas*, as we noted above. The *Gītā* is not a philosophical treatise intended to impart any particular doctrine. It is a

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[85]Nathaniel Pearson, *Sri Aurobindo and the Soul Quest of Man*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1952, p. 32.

[86]R.C. Zaehner, *Evolution in Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 10.

[87]R.R. Diwakar, *Mahayogi Sri Aurobindo*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1967, p. 130.

[88]*Ibid.*, p. 235.

continuation of the religious tradition of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads and expounds different strands of that tradition. "The *Gītā*", writes Aurobindo, "starts from this Vedantic synthesis and upon the basis of its essential ideas builds another harmony of the three great means and powers, Love, Knowledge, and Works, through which the soul of man can directly approach and cast itself into the Eternal".[89] Aurobindo observes that the *Gītā* gives only "a passing and perfunctory attention" to *Hatha* and *Rāja Yogas*. His exposition of the *Gītā* does not adhere to any orthodox schools, Vedantic or Tantric. His whole approach is based on the conviction that the richness and history of the tradition should open new vistas of human experience in the modern context. He recoils from the prospect of our entrenching ourselves in the part or even "within the four corners of the teaching of the *Gītā*."[90] He shows a remarkable openness to modern philosophies of science and religion. Declares he, "We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future".[91] At the same time the power of the living past is not negated in his philosophy. In his re-interpretation of the religious texts, he was fully aware of the dominant theme of inwardness in them and he attempts a bold linking of this "inwardness" with the problems of "this world". He says, "...we have not only to assimilate the great theistic religions of India and the world and a recovered sense of the meaning of Buddhism, but to take full account of the potent though limited revelations of modern knowledge and seeking...."[92] In this spiritual pursuit, Aurobindo believes that a new understanding of the *Gītā*—the *yoga* of the *Gītā*—throws a great light.[93] Even this new understanding is essentially a synthesis

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[89]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 7.

[90]*loc. cit.*,

[91]*Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

[92]*Ibid.*, p. 8.

[93]The *Rājayoga* of Patanjali is different from the *yoga* of which the *Gītā* speaks. The basic difference, we may note, stems from the concept of God itself. For Patanjali, God is neither the creator of *prakṛti* nor of the individual soul. He does not subscribe to the Vedantic concept of Brahman as the ultimate reality. He maintains that those who practise *yoga* can attain liberation without meditating on God.

in the tradition of the *Gītā* for its philosophy is one of synthesis, "harmonised by a sort of natural and living assimilation".[94]

The *Gītā* is a Vedantic work in its foundation, though its philosophy is coloured by the ideas of *Sāṁkhya* and *Yoga*.[95] Aurobindo maintains that the *Yoga* it teaches is primarily a practical system and the metaphysical ideas are brought in only as explanatory of this practical system. At the same time the Vadantic knowledge the *Gītā* declares is not opposed to devotion and works. On the other hand, devotion and works are considered to be of equal importance in the pilgrimage of the human soul. This *Yoga* of the *Gītā*, according to Aurobindo "is founded upon the analytical philosophy of the *Sāṁkhyas*" and takes it as a starting-point and keeps it as "a large element of its method and doctrine."[96] But, Aurobindo makes it clear that the *Sāṁkhya* of the *Gītā* is not a system based on *Kārikas* of Ishwara Krishna nor is its *Yoya* the *Yoga* system of Patanjali. The classical *Sāṁkhya* is atheistic, while "the *Sāṁkhya* of the *Gītā* admits and subtly reconciles the theistic, pantheistic and monistic views of the universe".[97] The *Yoga* of the *Gītā*, as Aurobindo sees it, does not attempt to adopt any strict and scientific gradation as an *Rājayoga*, but it "seeks by the adoption of a few principles of subjective poise and action to bring about a renovation of the soul and a sort of change, ascension or new birth out of the lower

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God only helps an aspirant to practise the art of *yoga* by removing impediments to it. Patanjali prescribes the eightfold path of yoga for liberation; *Yama-niyama-āsana-prānayama·pratyāhāra-dhārana-dhyāna-samādhyayo astvavangani*. (*Yoga-sūtra* II.29). While the aim of the *Yoga* of Patanjali is to transcend the sphere of actions and duties, to rise to a stage in which one could give up all one's activities, mental or physical, the *Yoga* of the *Gītā* affirms the ideal of work and knowledge at the same time. (Cf. S.N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, p. 504.)

[94]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 62.

[95]This position of Aurobindo is keeping in line with the traditional commentators. Sankara, for example, says, "*taditam gītāśāstraṁ sarvavedarthasārasaṁgrahabhutaṁ*.

[96]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 61.

[97]*Ibid.*, p. 62.

nature into the divine".[98] Here, it seems that Aurobindo's understanding of the *Yoga* of the *Gītā* amounts to an action oriented translation of the philosophy of Patanjali.

The term '*yoga*' is derived from the Sanskrit root '*yuj*', which means to unite, yoke, Patanjali takes this meaning for granted in his formulations of the *Yoga sūtras*. Commenting on 1.2 of the *Yoga sūtra*, Purohit Swami writes, "It (*yoga*) joins the personal Self and the impersonal Self".[99] *Yoga* is also interpreted as keeping "the mind fixed in abstract meditation".[100] These two aspects of the *Yoga* are implied in the *Sūtras* of Patanjali.[101] Insofar as the discipline of *Yoga* is a technique of liberation, it is the act of uniting and becoming one with the impersonal Self. Absolute control of the mind, *chitta vritti nirodhah*, is an essential step towards this. In Aurobindo's writings we see an attempt to combine these two aspects of the *Yoga*, namely, union with the impersonal Self through absolute control of the mind. R.R. Diwakar says that *yoga* for Aurobindo has come to mean, "the method or technique that leads to the union of the soul with the Over-self or the Universal Self".[102]

In the *Gītā*, the term *yoga* has a wider meaning. Each of the eighteen chapters of the *Gītā* is named a *Yoga*. Thus, it applies to all the paths leading to God-realization. But, among these, three paths, or *Yogas* are pre-eminent. They are *Karmayoga*, *Bhaktiyoga* and *Jñānayoga*. According to Aurobindo, the core of the *Gītā* teaching consists in the harmonisation of these *Yogas*. Most commentators of the *Gītā* take one or the other *Yoga* as the supreme one and place the other two as subservient to the one which fits into their philosophical theme. Aurobindo strongly voices his objection to this kind of sectarian interpretations, though there is room for others to criticise that he too is not completely free from

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[98]*loc. cit.*,

[99]Patanjali, *Aphorisms of Yoga*, translated into English by Purohit Swami, with a commentary, Faber and Faber, London, 1938, p. 25.

[100]Patanjali, *Yoga Sūtras*, translated by J.R. Ballentyne and Govind Sastri Deva, Susil Gupta, Calcutta, 1963, p. 9.

[101]*atha yoganushasanam yogash chitta vritti nirodhah tadā drashtuh svarupe avasthānam*, (*Yoga sūtras*. I.1-3).

[102]R.R. Diwakar, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

the same pitfalls. He writes, "The *Gītā* lends itself easily to this kind of error, because it is easy, by throwing particular emphasis on one of its aspects or even on some salient and emphatic text and putting all the rest of the eighteen chapters into the background or making them a subordinate and auxiliary teaching, to turn it into a partisan of our own doctrine or dogma."[103] As against this, the synthesis of these three *Yogas*, what Aurobindo calls "the triune way of knowledge, works and devotion,"[104] is the way that culminates in the final union with the divine Being and oneness with the supreme divine Nature. A.B. Purani, who is an interpreter of Aurobindo's thoughts, summarises the result of this synthesis of the three *Yogas* in the following words. Purani writes, "When one knows the Supreme by identity with Him, one aspires to serve Him by his actions and one adores Him and loves Him with all his heart."[105] This is the *Pūrṇayoga* of the *Gītā* as Aurobindo expounds it.

Aurobindo's conviction that *Pūrṇayoga* is the only *Yoga* which will solve the ultimate questions of life leads him to an outright rejection of any system of thought developed from one or other aspects of the teachings of the *Gītā*. Without naming Tilak, he contends that some authors try to take advantage of the *Karmayoga* of *Gītā* and make it a "Gospel of Works." He points out that the works of which the *Gītā* speaks are works motivated by devotion and thirst for the knowledge of God. What modern mind sees as humanitarian and social has nothing to do with the *Yoga* of the *Gītā*. Any idea of service one may read into the *Gītā* is a modern Europeanized misreading "into a thoroughly antique, and thoroughly oriental and Indian teaching." He continues, "That which the *Gītā* teaches is not a human but a divine action, not the performance of social duties but the abandonment of all other standards of duty or conduct for a selfless performance of the divine will working through our nature; not social service, but the action of the Best, the God-possess-

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[103]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 26.

[104]*Ibid.*, p. 34.

[105]A.B. Purani, *Sri Aurobindo, Addresses in His Life and Teachings*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1955, p. 109.

ed, the Master-men done impersonally for the sake of the world and as a sacrifice to Him who stands behind man and Nature."[106]

Judging by this standard, most of the modern commentators of the *Gītā*, Tilak, Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, *et. al.* are guilty of some misreading of European ideas into the *Gītā*. They all consider that the *Gītā* contains practical guidelines for social behaviour and conduct. In other words, the *Gītā* for them is a book of practical ethics as well as one of spiritual disciplines. Aurobindo takes the *Gītā* only as a book of spiritual life. He says that the idea of social service and action comes from the Western Christian tradition which has rejected the philosophical idealism of the Greco-Roman culture and even the devotionalism of the Middle Ages. He thinks that in this process the West has erected society in place of God. He writes, "At its best it is practical, ethical, social, pragmatic, altruistic, humanitarian."[107] But, the danger of this tendency of the modern mind (he identifies the Western as the modern) is that it has "exiled from its practical motive-power the two essential things, God or the Eternal and spirituality or the God-state, which are the master conceptions of the *Gītā*."[108] What Aurobindo says is true from one angle, "but it would not be possible," points out R.D. Ranade, "to negate the importance of the ethical element in the *Bhagavadgītā*."[109]

It follows as a natural corollary to the above argument that Aurobindo opposes the doctrine of disinterested action, expounded by Gandhi. He says, "...it is a mistake to interpret the *Gītā* from the standpoint of the mentality of today and force it to teach us the disinterested performance of duty as the highest and all sufficient law."[110] Though he does not make any personal reference to Gandhi, it is obvious who he has in mind. He points out that when Kṛṣṇa com-

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[106]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 28.

[107]*loc. cit.*,

[108]*Ibid.*, p. 29.

[109]R.D. Ranade, *The Bhagavadgītā as a Philosophy of God-Realisation*, University of Nagpur, Nagpur, 1959, p. 171.

[110]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 29.

manded Arjuna, "Arise, slay thy enemies, enjoy a prosperous kingdom," he was not preaching any disinterested action. On the other hand, it was given after a great spiritual foundation had been established for action. Performance of one's duties, *svakarmaṇi*, is only a preliminary stage in the life of the disciple "when he begins ascending the hill of *Yoga*."[111] Duty, according to Aurobindo, is a relative term depending on one's relation to the community. If there is a conflict between one's duty and moral conscience, the latter commands unconditional obedience. The *Gītā* calls us to ascend to this higher plane, which is a "supreme poise," leaving behind the mainly practical, and the purely ethical. This ascent leads to the "Brahmanic consciousness." The attainment of this consciousness is the meaning of rising beyond all the three modes of *guṇas*, *triguṇātīta*. Aurobindo points to the *carama śloka* of the *Gītā*[112] and says that the call to abandon all duties and take refuge in the Supreme alone, negates the importance of duties which society and custom demand from an individual. He writes: "If that (refuge in the Supreme) can only be attained by renouncing works and life and all duties and the call is strong within us, then into the bonfire they must go, and there is no help for it. The call of God is imperative and cannot be weighted againt any other considerations."[113] This statement has a great personal meaning for Aurobindo. He abandoned what he considered as his *dharma* at one time and went to Pondicherry in obedience to a divine call "to take refuge in the Supreme alone."

The *Pūrṇayoga* of Aurobindo strives not only at a synthesis of the three *Yogas* of the *Gītā*, but also to join hands with the evolutionary, creative effort of nature, through infusion of the eternal in the temporal, the super mind in matter. Writing on the *Yoga* of Aurobindo, Pitirim A. Sorokin remarks, "It (*Pūrṇayoga*) endeavours to transform the empirical humanity into the divinized superman; to build progressively the 'Kingdom of God' in this life, on this

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[111]*Ibid.*, p. 32.

[112]*Bhagavadgītā*, XVIII, 66.

[113]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 30.

planet, here and now."[114] The triune path of the *Gītā* forms the central theme in Aurobindo's interpretation. He says, "This integral turning of the soul Godwards bases royally the *Gītā* synthesis of knowledge and works and devotion."[115] This synthesis leans most towards the side of pure knowledge, but that is the knowledge of the whole Godhead, *samagraṁ māṁ*, which Kṛṣṇa had promised Arjuna. Again, this supreme knowledge, being supraphysical it can be had only through suprarational and supra-psychological experience. In Aurobindo's system, this is the culminating stage of evolution. As S.K. Maitra observes, "...it is that stage which first decisively changes the character of evolution by transforming its character of ignorance and its basis of Inconscience into a movement of knowledge."[116] When this movement of knowledge occurs, our unquiet minds, and blinded lives "are stilled and turned towards this many-aspected One and the secret truth of self and God made so real to us and intimate that we can either consciously live and dwell in it or lose our separate selves in the Eternal and no longer be compelled at all by the mental Ignorance."[117]

This experience, if it can be called an experience, is a fulfilment, not an annulment. It is to be pointed out that the purpose of all *yogas* is to attain this fulfilment, and each of the *yogas* has its own role. Man can only aspire for this experience of "union with the One who has become in Time and Space all that is" through the offering of all *yogas*. At this stage, Aurobindo adds, "All knowledge then becomes an adoration and aspiration, but all works too become an adoration and aspiration. Works of nature and freedom of soul are unified in this adoration and become one self-uplifting to the one Godhead."[118]

Aurobindo is one with the orthodox commentators of the

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[114]Pitirim A. Sorokin, "The Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo," in *The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, ed. by Haridas Chaudhuri and Frederic Spiegelberg, Allen & Unwin, London, 1960, p. 207.

[115]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 296.

[116]S.K. Maitra, *An Introduction to the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, Banaras Hindu University, Banaras, 1945, p. 70.

[117]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 511.

[118]*Ibid* , p. 279.

Gītā in stressing the importance of sacrifice and self-surrender. The uplifting of our nature he believes is only possible "through sacrifice by the dedicated heart to the eternal Purushottama."[119] Man's spiritual pursuits will provide him only with limited results, if he does not realize the secret of self-surrender. He writes, "Nothing but the highest knowledge and adoration, no other way than entire self-giving and surrender to this highest who is all, will bring us to the Highest."[120] He calls the realization of this secret the 'great finale' of all *Yogas*. Rishabhchand summarizes the philosophical basis of Aurobindo's integral Yoga as follows: "The single secret of Sri Aurobindo's quest of truth-consciousness was a complete, unreserved, integral surrender of his whole being to the Divine and His Supreme force—a surrender not only of the mind or the heart or the will and life's activities, but of every part of his being and every movement of his nature."[121]

Universalism in the Gītā

Aurobindo considers the *Gītā* as the most non-sectarian of all Hindu scriptures. In fact, the greatness of the *Gītā* lies in its ability to absorb and synthesise opposing systems of thought. Modern Western scholars like W.D.P. Hill, R.C. Zaehner and Juan Mascaro also see the *Gītā* as a great synthesis. Hill writes, "But never did [an] author compose so widely comprehensive an eirenicon in a spirit of less compromise".[122] Mascaro calls the *Gītā* a "vast symphony". He explains the nature of this symphony in the following words. "The melodies of vision, love, and work in Eternity become one simple final strain of unearthly tenderness and beauty, the simple call of God to man: 'Come to me for thy salvation'."[123] The *Gītā* does not attempt to inculcate any

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[119]*Ibid.*, p. 299.

[120]*Ibid.*, p. 302.

[121]Rishabhchand, "The Philosophical Basis of Integral Yoga," T*he Integral Philosophy of Aurobindo*, p. 217.

[122]W. Douglas P. Hill, *The Bhagavadgītā, An English Translation and Commentary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966, p. 22. (First edition 1928). S. Radhakrishnan echoes the same thought when he

particular philosophical dogma or creed. Of course, sectarian commentators always found justification for their doctrines in the *Gītā*. In the light of this tendency, Aurobindo concludes that it is impossible to derive the exact metaphysical connotation of some of the terms used as they were understood at the time of the compilation of the *Gītā*. Every scripture necessarily contains two elements; "temporary, perishable, belonging to the ideas of the period and country in which it was produced, the other eternal and imperishable and applicable in all ages and countries".[124] Aurobindo thinks that the *Gītā* contains only very little that is merely local and temporal. At any rate, the historical context, that is, if one is inclined to admit the context as historical, forms only the strarting-point or outer crust of the *Gītā*. When one gets beyond this outer crust, the *Gītā* contains living truths which are relevant for all times. He admits that some of the old expressions and symbols of the *Gītā* may not make sense to us. But, he goes on to say, "What is of entirely permanent value is that which besides being universal has been experienced, lived and seen with a higher than the intellectual vision".[125]

The Yoga of the *Gītā*, as we discussed above, has universal significance. It cuts across all the narrow boundaries of sects and religions. Its aim, as Aurobindo repeatedly points out, is the divinization of humanity. Kṛṣṇa reveals to Arjuna, the human disciple, step by step "the magnificent realities of God and Self and Spirit and the nature of the complex world and the relation of man's mind and life and heart and senses to the Spirit, and the victorious means by which through his own spiritual self-discipline and effort can rise out of mortality into immortality..."[126] This discipline

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writes, "The teacher of the *Gītā* reconciles the different systems in vogue and gives us a comprehensive eirenicon which is not local and temporary but is for all time and all men" (S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 75).

[123]Juan Mascaro, *The Bhagavadgītā, Translated from the Sunskrit, With an Introduction*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1962, p. 25.

[124]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 2.

[125]*loc. cit.*,

[126]*Ibid.*, p. 510.

is open to all who surrender "to the Supreme Godhead above and around and within".[127] Aurobindo expresses his conviction throughout his exposition of the *Gītā* that the teachings of the *Gītā* will lead the soul of man into its right relationship with God and world existence. He carries the thought of the *Gītā* into his political writings as well. He writes, "The revelation of God in man is the one eternal ideal that it (India) seeks as much through its attempts to reconstruct the economic life of the Indian people, or through all its arduous struggles for the political emancipation of this subject race".[128]

The picture of Arjuna in the battlefield has a universal relevance. Aurobindo points out that the conflict and predicament of Arjuna is the predicament of all human beings. He writes: "...he is the type of the struggling human soul who has not yet received the knowledge but has grown fit to receive it by action in the world in a close companionship and an increasing nearness to the higher and divine self in humanity".[129] The discourses in the *Gītā* are given to remove the numbness of Arjuna's soul. He was dejected in the battlefield because he found it difficult to apply the ideal or standard he had been following all his life. Aurobindo does not call this setting of the *Gitā* symbolical, as Gandhi does. He sees Arjuna as the representative man of "a great world-struggle and divinely-guided movement of men and nations".[130] Again, Arjuna is the man who needs liberation from his own sense of values and attachment. Finally, when he has the vision of the Eternal, his doubts are cleared and he has been lifted from the lower into a higher consciousness and "out of ego into Self, out of life into mind, vitality and body into the higher beyond which is the nature of the Divine".[131] The ascent of the human soul to a higher plane is the fulfilment the *Gītā* offers. Aurobindo underlines one

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[127]*loc. cit.*,

[128]Haridas Mukherjee, "*Bande Mataram*" *and Indian Nationalism*, Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1957, p. 95.

[129]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 17.

[130]*Ibid.*, p. 18.

[131]*Ibid.*, p. 25.

particular approach of the *Gītā* to all spiritual issues, whether it be action, knowledge, sacrifice or liberation. "The *Gītā* attempts to reconcile conflicting views which were in vogue and at the same time tries the widening of narrow and formal notions to admit the great general truths they unduly restrict..."[132]

In the words of Aurobindo "A spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of the future".[133] But he does not call this "a universal religion" as many universalists would do. He is quick to admit that there is no universal religious system, one in mental creed and vital form. He points out that the *Gītā* contains guidelines for such a "spiritual religion" without enclosing it in any cage of dogma. On the other hand, "it lays the philosophical foundation for the unification of the human race".[134] The principal ideas of the *Gītā* are eternally valuable and valid, as Aurobindo understands them. These principles do not support the exclusive claims of any school of thought. He writes:

> The language of the *Gītā*, the structure of thought, the combination and balancing of ideas belong neither to the temper of a sectarian teacher nor to the spirit of a rigorous analytical dialectics cutting off one angle of the truth to exclude all the others; but rather there is a wide, undulating, encircling movement of ideas which is the manifestation of a vast synthetic mind and a rich synthetic experience. This is one of those great syntheses in which Indian spirituality has been as rich as in its creation of the more intensive, exclusive movements of knowledge and religious realisation that follow out with an absolute concentration on one clue, one path to its extreme issues. It does not cleave asunder, but reconciles and unifies.[135]

The *Gītā* lays stress on the divine perfectability of man and on dwelling in God. The synthesis of the *Gītā* is at once

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[132]*Ibid.*, p. 102.

[133]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry, 1950, p. 378.

[134]Haridas Chaudhuri, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

[135]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, pp. 5-6.

spiritual and intellectual and avoids any rigid determination that would limit its universal comprehensiveness. He carries the Vedantic ideas of the *Gītā* into his formulation of the "ideal of human unity". He writes, "A religion of humanity means the growing realisation that there is a secret Spiritual divine Reality, in which we are all one, that humanity is its highest present vehicle on earth, that the human race and the human being are the means by which it will progressively receive itself here. It implies a growing attempt to live out this knowledge and being about a kingdom of this divine Spirit upon earth".[136] This is the new gospel of "Integral Advaita", which Aurobindo preaches to the world. He declares: "This gospel which was given only to the few must now be offered to all mankind for its deliverance".[137]

The *Gītā* concept of *avatāra* or incarnation (literally descent or coming down) has been one of pivotal significance in Aurobindo's exposition of the *Gītā*. He says that the figure of Kṛṣṇa "becomes, as it were the symbol of the divine dealings with humanity".[138] It is of little importance, as he looks at the *avatāra*, whether Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā* is historical or not. The controversy among Christian theologians on the question of the historicity of Jesus Christ does not make any sense to him. He writes, "If the Christ, God made man, lives within our spiritual being, it would seem to matter little whether or not a son of Mary physically lived and suffered and died in Judea. So too the Krishna who matters to us is the eternal incarnation of the Divine and not the historical teacher and leader of men".[139] Most of the orthodox Hindu scholars would agree with this view of *avatāra*. But Aurobindo goes one step further and holds that *avatāra* is descent and ascent at the same time, it is the ascent of humanity into God-head. God descends to uplift the world

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[136]Aurobindo Ghose, *Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 378. Cf. *Bhagavadgītā* VI. 29, "He whose self is harmonised by yoga seeth the self abiding in all beings and all beings in the Self; everywhere he sees the same."

[137]Aurobindo Ghose, *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1958, p. 33.

[138]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 15.

[139]*Ibid*, p. 12.

and Aurobindo couples this with the evolutionary process of matter into spirit and spirit into higher realms of existence. *Avatāra* is the evolutionary process of divinization of humanity. He says, "The vision of the Puranic legends of *Avatāra*, however crude and allegorical in manner, is sufficiently suggestive of the ascending order of the gradual development of the world-spirit".[140] He goes on to mention the semblance of evolution in the Puranic *avatāras*, from *Matsya* (fish) to Kṛṣṇa, through *Varāha* (boar) *Nrishimha* (lion-man) and so on. He is emphatic on this point of evolution. To him, "Avatārhood would have little meaning if it were not connected with evolution".[141] He maintains that Kṛṣṇa, Buddha and *Kalki* depict the last three stages of evolution and they are in fact three higher stages of spiritual development. Thus, he links the *Gītā* concept of *avatāra* with his philosophy of evolution. He writes, "Kṛṣna opens the possibility of Overmind, Buddha tries to shoot beyond the supreme liberation—but that liberation is still negative, not returning upon earth to complete positively the evolution. *Kalki* is to correct this by bringing the Kingdom of the Divine upon earth, destroy-the opposing *Asura* forces".[142]

In his later writings Aurobindo sees evolution, which is the human side of *avatāra*, both in political terms and in terms of even greater awareness. R.C. Zaehner makes a very pertinent observation on Aurobindo's concept of evolution. Writes Zaehner, "(It is) a progression from apparently inanimate matter to life, from life to consciousness and mind, from mind to what he calls Overmind, and from Overmind to Supermind, which....is pure cit, pure consciousness, operating in the world as *sakti*, or power."[143] The manifestation of the divine, that is, *avatāra*, calls for a human response and that response is "climbing out of the ignorance and limitation of his ordinary humanity."[144] Without this universal

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[140]T.V. Kapali Sastri, *The Gospel of the Gītā*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1969, p. 16.

[141]Quoted by V. Madhusudan Reddy in Sri Aurobindo's *Philosophy of Evolution*, Institute of Human Study, Hyderabad, 1966, p. 23.

[142]*loc. cit.*,

[143]R.C. Zaehner, *Evolution in Religion*, p. 35.

[144]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 141.

human significance, the *Gītā* teaching of *avatāra*, Aurobindo contends, "would be only a dogma, a popular superstition, or an imaginative or mystic deification of historical or legendary supermen."[145] He is convinced that the real aim of the *Gītā's* teaching is to transfigure the human nature itself into the divine."[146]

The human and divine aspect of avatārhood is very important in Aurobindo's system. He does not accept the orthodox interpretation of the famous verses (7 and 8) in the fourth chapter of the *Gītā*, which set forth the purpose of *avatāra* for protection of *dharma*.[147] If it were the purpose of *avatāra*, he contends that it "would be an otiose phenomenon" since *dharma* can be protected by human movements and by sages without any actual incarnation.[148] In the larger framework of the Vedanta, especially Advaita Vedanta, this interpretation has a special meaning. For the Vedantin, "...all beings are even in their individuality unborn spirits, eternal without beginning or end, and in their essential existence and their universality all are the one unborn Spirit of whom birth and death are only a phenomenon of the assumptions and change of forms."[149] However, it should be pointed out that the *Gītā* does not speak of any ascent or assumption. It understands the divine manifestation only as *avatāra*, divine descent into human plane. Radhakrishnan's observation on *avatāra* is very pertinent here. He writes, "An *avatāra* is a descent of God into man, and not an ascent of man into God."[150]

In his concluding chapter of the exposition of the *Gītā*, which as he says, is an attempt to "distinguish its essential and living message"[151] for the spiritual welfare of humanity, Aurobindo gives a stimulating summary of the message of

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[145]*Ibid.*, p. 134.

[146]*loc. cit.*,

[147]*paritrāṇāya sādhūnāṁ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām dharmasaṁsthāpanārthāya saṁbhavāmi yuge-yuge. (Bhagavadgītā,* IV. 8).

[148]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 134.

[149]*Ibid.*, p. 136.

[150]S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*. Vol. II, p. 545.

[151]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 8.

the *Gītā*. This summary, as can be expected, is coloured by his own philosophy—"Integral Advaita." It calls for "a complete surrender of all the ways of your being to the Supreme"[152] and in that surrender the human soul discovers the meaning of existence. That meaning as revealed by the *Gītā* is this: "Existence is not merely a machinery of Nature, a wheel of law in which the soul is entangled for a moment or for ages; it is a constant manifestation of the Spirit. Life is not for the sake of life alone, but for God, and the living soul of man is an eternal portion of Godhead."[153] The *Gītā*, as he looks at it, gives a total spiritual direction to the whole life and nature and that is the only hope of uplifting humanity beyond itself. It gives practical means to realize the ultimate unity of humanity.

"A spiritual oneness" he writes, "which would create a psychological oneness not dependent upon any intellectual or outward uniformity and compel a oneness of life not bound up with its mechanical means of unification, but ready always to enrich its secure unity by a free inner variation and a freely varied outer self-expression, this would be the basis of a higher type of human existence."[154] Thus, the *Gītā*, established as one of the three highest Vedantic authorities, has a message which goes beyond the confines of the Vedantins. Aurobindo sees it as "a gate opening on the whole world of spiritual truth and experience and the view it gives us, embraces all the provinces of that supreme region. It maps out, but does not cut up or build walls or hedges to confine our visions."[155]

One of the great features of Aurobindo's commentary on the *Gītā* is his new synthesis of Advaita, Visistadvaita, Saktaism and Bhedabheda and of the physical and the spiritual. This really introduces a new and revolutionary element into Indian religious thought. But, in this attempt, he reads too much of his own philosophy into the *Gītā*. For example, the

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[152]*Ibid.*, p. 545.
[153]*Ibid.*, p. 526.
[154]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 379.
[155]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 6.

psychological account of the developmental grades of consciousness have no genuine basis in the *Gītā*, unless one presses certain verses too hard. His vision of the ascent of man into divinity and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth are rooted more in his gnostic ideal than in the *Gītā*. Though Aurobindo accepts traditional Indian orientations on many basic issues, his interpretation is basically modern. It is to be noted that in his interpretations of the Indian Scriptures, he is eager to show that his doctrine is orthodox by being in conformity with them. To his great credit it must be said that the problems he tries to tackle are universal, though the frame of reference is typically Indian. His answers to these perennial spiritual problems, as Beatrice Bruteau observes, "...while taking advantage of wisdom from the recent and distant past, are characteristically modern."[156] Aurobindo, in his theory of evolution, zest for progress and undying optimism, is closer to Teilhard de Chardin, than to the *Gītā*. For, both of them speak in terms of the "transformation of the human race and its unification in and around a central focus of attraction, the *sat-cit-ānanda* of Aurobindo, the Christ-Omega of Teilhard de Chardin."[157] Aurobindo's success lies in his ability to reconcile and synthesise opposing ideas and in bringing out their relevance to modern times.

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[156]Beatrice Bruteau, *Worthy is the World: The Hindu Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Rutherford, 1971, p. 254-255.

[157]R.C. Zaehner, *Evolution in Religion*, p. 48.

CHAPTER V

Gītā and the Nationalist Revival

The Hindu Scriptures, both *śruti* and *smṛti*, contain many hymns praising the motherland, known as *Āryavarta* or *Bhāratavarṣa*. The idea of extolling the land of one's birth as one's mother goes back to the Vedic times. Modern Indian nationalists consider the famous hymn of the *Atharvaveda* which says, "The earth is the mother, I am her son,"[1] as an incipient formulation of the concept of nationalism. Manu, the lawgiver who is matter-of-factish generally, becomes very emotional when he defines the boundaries of his country. He describes *Brahmavarta* (India) as "the land created by the Gods." To him, "The Mother and the Motherland are greater than heaven itself."[2] The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* hails India "as the best of all countries," where "it is only after many thousands of births, and the aggregation of much merit that living beings are sometimes born as men."[3] These sentiments, though they are a reflection of the times, did not succeed in forging a national unity or a sense of nationhood as envisioned by the Vedic seers. Even as early as the Ṛgvedic times, the seers exhorted the people to live together with love and fraternity, inspired by the spirit of unity, and work together with that ideal and ambition.[4] This call for unity was lost when the social institution based on *varṇa*—the caste system —become very powerful. "The caste system," K.M. Panikkar observes, "originally a process of integration, degenerated early into a system of division and subdivision till at last the broad four castes disappeared into innumerable sub-castes,

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[1] *mātā bhūmiḥ putro'haṁ pṛithivyaḥ. Atharveda*, XII. i, 12.

[2] *jananī janmabhūmiśca svargādapi garīyasi.* Quoted by Radha Kumud Mooke.ji in *Nationalism in Hindu Culture*, Delhi, S. Chand, 1957, p. 16.

[3] *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, II, iii, 23.

[4] Cf. *Ṛigveda*, x. 191. 2, 4.

thereby rendering the development of a common Hindu feeling or a realisation of a sense of Hindu community difficult.''[5] Though the Hindu community lived face to face with the Muslim community, for more than 600 years, there emerged no spirit of communal solidarity. These two communities lived in the same area and developed as parallel societies. Most of the Hindus accepted the orthodox interpretation of the *śāstras* which justified the social institutions and ceremonial practices which thwarted the development of a genuine nationhood.

The Reform Movements of the latter part of the nineteenth century attempted to create a social and religious milieu which could usher in a new spirit of nationalism. Most of the leaders of the Reform Movements were intellectuals who were inspired by the liberal ideas of the West. They were the people who became the leaders of the Indian National Congress which had its first session in 1885. Leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath Banerjea, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and others, who were impregnated with liberal ideas of the nineteenth century England, believed in the development of an all-India liberal and secular nationalism.[6] This form of nationalism was considered to be a western importation by a powerful group within the Congress, known as "the Extremists." Tilak and Aurobindo belonged to this group and they "looked more to indigenous institutions for the development of Indian nationalism and they sought to rely on a reinvigorated and aggressive Hinduism rather than the constitutionalism and liberalism of the West."[7] The national programme of the "Extremists" was to revive the ancient glory of India and to awaken a new national self-consciousness among the people of India. This new thrust of Indian nationalism was a natural continuation of the Indian renaissance of the nineteenth century, according to Aurobindo. He says that the Indian renaissance aimed at a

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[5]K.M. Panikkar, *Hinduism and the West, A Study in Challenge and Response*, Punjab University, Chandigarh, 1964, p. 13-14.

[6]Cf. Sankar Ghose, *Socialism, Democracy and Nationalism in India*, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1973, p. 134.

[7]*loc cit.*

recovery of the old spiritual gospel contained in the sacred scriptures of the land.[8] Tilak, who revived the Maratha politico-religious tradition speaks in the same vein on the nature of Indian nationalism. He says:

> The common factor in Indian society is the feeling of *Hindutva* (devotion to Hinduism). I do not speak of Muslims and Christians at present because everywhere the majority of our society consists of Hindus. We say that Hindus of Punjab, Bengal, . . . are one and the reason for this is only Hindu *dharma*. There may be different doctrines in Hindu *dharma*, but certain principles can be found in common, and because of this alone a sort of feeling that we belong to one religion has remained among people speaking different languages in such a vast country.[9]

It is apparent that the religious character of nationalism became a rallying centre for the majority. But what united the Hindus created a chasm in the body politic and the religious philosophy of the extremists alienated the Muslims from the national movement. Thus, with Tilak, Aurobindo, B.C. Pal, *el. al.*, Indian nationalism took a religious turn and a moderating influence came only with Gandhi assuming the leadershlp of the Congress. He "spoke less of religious nationalism or spiritual nationalism and more of the duty of nationalists to remove the woes and miseries of his countrymen."[10] In spreading this message Gandhi turned to the *Gītā* more than any other religious text.

As a historical generalisation it may be stated that there existed a cultural unity in India for a very long time and one can trace this unity in the literature, art and religion of different parts of India. But nationalism in the modern sense, that is political nationalism, is a new phenomenon in India,

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[8]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, *The Renaissance in India*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1657, p. 32.

[9]Quoted by Stanley A. Wolpert in *Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1962, p. 135-6.

[10]Sankar Ghose, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

if we accept John Stuart Mills' definition of nationalism. He defines nationalism as follows:

> A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a nationality if they are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others, which made them cooperate with each other more willingly than with the other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be governed by themselves or a portion of them exclusively.[11]

In the light of this definition India had many nationalities, though under the foreign rule, nationalism in the sense of patriotic anti-foreign feelings united these nationalities. Aurobindo traces this process back into the long history of India and asserts, "This is always a sure sign that the essential nation-unit is already there and that there is an indissoluble national vitality necessitating the inevitable emergence of the organized nation."[12] To establish a religious foundation for this national unity and vitality, almost every leader of the national revival turned to the Vedanta as did Vivekananda in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In the hands of these leaders, the *Gītā* became the pre-eminent text of the Vedanta, for in its synthetic philosophy they found a new light to illumine the national movement.

Gītā and the Idea of Nationhood

Commenting on the place of the *Gītā* in the national revival, K.M. Panikkar writes: "The clearest evidence of the supreme importance of the *Gītā* in modern Indian life is provided by the fact that almost every national leader of importance excepting Nehru has written commentaries on it and himself has at least on one occasion quoted from it to confound a Communist who had the temerity to quote the *Gītā* in support of his views."[13] Though there is an element of ex-

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[11]Quoted by R.C. Majumdar in *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Mukhopadyaya, Calcutta, 1963, Vol. I, p. 321.

[12]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 36.

[13]K.M. Panikkar, *Hinduism and the West*, p. 34.

aggeration in this statement, it points out the great influence this text exerted in the national life of India. As we noted above, the political programme of the extremists was oriented towards a Hindu revivalism which could unite the people. So they were keen on using religious faith and pride in the past to rouse the patriotic fervour of the people. Tilak and Aurobindo entered the national scene with great goals for the country. They even displayed an element of messianism in their utterances. Aurobindo, for example, declares the mission of India in the following words:

> . . . . Because God is there, and it is His mission, and He has something for us to do. He has a work for His great and ancient nation. Therefore He has been born again to do it, therefore He is revealing Himself in you not that you may be like other nations, not that you may rise merely by human strength to trample under foot the weaker peoples, but because something must come out from you which is to save the whole world.[14]

Tilak also expresses the same sentiments in his declaration of the purpose of political action. He says:

> To spread our *Dharma* in our people is one of the aspects of the national form of our religion. . . . Politics cannot be separated from religion.[15]

Through political action impregnated with these ideals Tilak hopes India to be a *guru* to the world. He believes that a day will come when "we shall see our preachers preaching the *Sanātana Dharma* all over the world."[16]

About this messianic sense, V.P. Varma observes, ". . . the faith in the mission of India to save the world, has been a very pronounced feature in the writings and speeches of

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[14]Aurobindo Ghose, *Speeches*, p. 34-35.

[15]Quoted by Theodore L. Shay in *The Legacy of the Lokmanya*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1957, p. 90-91.

[16]B.G. Tilak, *His Writings and Speeches*, Ganesh, Madras, 1922, p. 41.

Indian leaders since Ram Mohan onwards."[17] It may be possible to discern certain sociological factors which produced this consciousness. Pride in the past and hope in the future really fanned it and in this the Indian situation is not very different from that of any other nation subjected to foreign rule and occupation. Hans Kohn's comments on nineteenth century nationalism applies very well to the Indian national situation. He writes:

> The nation transcends the limits of a social or political concept, it becomes a holy body sanctified by God, and nationalism is no longer a political loyalty which can be changed according to social circumstances and convictions but becomes a religious duty full of responsibility towards God and the redemption.[18]

The speeches and writings of Aurobindo and Tilak and to a lesser extent Gandhi's and Vinoba's attest this analysis of nationalism. The patriotic song *Bande Mātaram* of Bankim Chandra, which was accepted as the national anthem of the Congress identified *Bhārata Māta* (Mother India) with Goddess Durga. In consonance with this concept of the nation as a divine entity, Aurobindo and other national leaders "looked upon nationalism as a spiritual imperative, a virtually religious practice which was essential for the emancipation of the motherland as well as the spiritual development of the devotee."[19] In the light of this basic concept of the nationalists, their declarations, though they may appear to be excessive, were the agonizing cry of an enslaved nation, which took great pride in its religious and cultural heritage. For example, speaking to a Bombay audience Aurobindo declares:

> What is Nationalism? Nationalism is not a mere political programme; nationalism is a religion that has come from

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[17]Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*. Asia Publishing House, New York, 1960, p. 219.

[18]Hans Kohn, "Messianism," *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*.

[19]Karan Singh, *Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1963, p. 76.

God; Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to live. . . . If you are going to be a nationalist, if you are going to assent to this religion of nationalism, you must do it in the religious spirit. You must remember that you are the instruments of God.[20]

In his famous Uttarpara speech, Aurobindo narrates the vision of Kṛṣṇa he had while he was in the Alipore jail as a political prisoner. He says that Kṛṣṇa placed the *Gītā* in his hands and so deep and overwhelming was the entire experience that everywhere around him he saw only Kṛṣṇa Vasudeva "His (Kṛṣṇa's) strength entered into me and I was able to do the *Sādhana* of the *Gītā*."[21] His commentary on the *Gītā* testifies that this vision led him to re-discover the message of the *Gītā* for modern times. In some of his earlier writings Aurobindo regarded Kṛṣṇa as an incarnation whose intention was to establish an all-Indian imperial political system.[22] He believed that the very purpose of Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā* is to preach the gospel of action, military as well as political, impelled by the highest gnosis.[23] In the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa entered the political stage as a great leader and his mission was to bring about a unity of India. Kṛṣṇa did not lend his support to the Yadavas, though he belonged to that dynasty, because he accepted the claims of the Pandavas as rightful. This is why he installed Yudhistara as the king of *Bhāratavarṣa* after the battle of *Kurukṣetra*. Kṛṣṇa persuaded Arjuna to give up his desire for renunciation of the war because it would have frustrated the political aim of Kṛṣṇa.[24] According to Aurobindo, Kṛṣṇa's plans for an all-India imperialism were consummated by the destruction of Kauravas and other Kṣatrya powers.[25] This aspect of Kṛṣṇa as a diplomat was quite different from the traditional understanding of the *avatāra* as a protector of *dharma*.

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[20]Aurobindo Ghose, *Speeches*, p. 6.

[21]Aurobindo Ghose, *Uttarpara Speech*, p. 8.

[22]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, *Gītā ki Bhūmika* (in Hindi) Aurobindo Ashram, Pondichery, 1957, p. 72,

[23]Cf. *Ibid.*, p, 8.

[24]Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 78-79.

[25]Cf. *loc. cit.*

The battle of Kurukṣetra and Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna took an added significance and deeper meaning in the context of the Indian national struggle for freedom. More and more national leaders turned to the *Gītā* for inspiration and guidance. Many Indians saw the national struggle as another Kurukṣetra, a righteous war against the British imperialists, "when the right lay with the former, and some people had belief and faith in the re-appearance of Kṛṣṇa."[26] National leaders exhorted the masses to come forward and fulfill their *dharma* in this battle. Aurobindo addressed the Indian people in the following words:

> To shrink from bloodshed and violence under such circumstances is a weakness deserving as severe a rebuke as Sri Krishna addressed to Arjuna when he shrank from the colossal civil slaughter on the field of Kurukshetra. Liberty is the life-breath of a nation, and when the life is attacked, when it is sought to suppress all chance of breathing by violent pressure, any and every means of self-preservation becomes right and justifiable—just as it is lawful for a man who is being strangled to rid himself of the pressure on his throat by any means in his power.[27]

In another context, drawing on the *Gītā* concept of *dharma* he declares that nationalism is a *dharma* and at times struggle, battle and even murder could be part of the *dharma*, but not hatred and jealousy.[28] According to him the *Gītā* teaches that if a man could realize his spiritual identity with the absolute and feel that all external acts are being performed by the cosmic power or *Prakṛti* of the *Purusottama*, he could attain thereby a sense of equanimity; and for the disinterested performance of his actions, *swadharma*, he could even resort to violence, if that was imperative for the consummation of his enterprise.[29] Commenting on the *Gītā* view, "He

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[26]Vishvanath Prasad Varma, *op, cit.*, p. 50.

[27]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance*, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, (2nd ed,) 1952, p. 29.

[28]Cf. A. Ghose, *Dharma aur Jātiyata*, translated into Hindi by Deva Narayan Divivedi, Banaras, 1934, p. 78.

[29]Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

who is free from self-sense, whose understanding is not sullied, though he slay these people, he slays not—nor is he bound (by his actions),"[30] he writes:

> ...although the liberated man takes his part in the struggle and though he slays all these peoples, he slays no man and he is not bound by his work, because the work is that of the Master of the Worlds and it is he who has already slain in his hidden omnipotent will all these enemies. This work of destruction was needed that humanity might move forward to another creation and a new purpose...[31]

In another context he declares, without hiding his feelings, that to kill national enemies in a *dharma yudha* is also part of one's *dharma*.[32] In all these utterances Aurobindo claims the support of the *Gītā*. Quoting the *Gītā*, he states emphatically, "Better the law of one's being, though it be badly done, than an alien *dharma* well followed."[33]

Several years before Aurobindo started speaking out on national issues through his articles in the *Bande Mātaram* and through public addresses, Tilak was engaged in vigorous political activities, though mainly confined to the Maharashtra area in the beginning. Through his papers, *Kesar* (Marathi) and *The Mahratta* (English) he championed the cause of his people against any and all who would be unjust and autocratic. "As the editor of *Kesari*," observes Theodore L. Shay, "Tilak became the awakener of India, the Lion of Maharashtra, the most influential newspaper editor of his

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[30]*Bhagavadgītā*, XVIII, 17. Sankara's comment on this verse may be recalled here· "Though he slays from the worldly standpoint, he does not slay in truth."

[31]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, 457.

[32]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, *Dharma aur Jātiyata*, p. 43.

[33]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, p. 39, *Śreyān svrdharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanusthiāt svadharme nidhanat Śreyāh paradharmo bhayāvahah. (Bhagavadgītā*, III, 35). In his commentary, Aurobindo paraphrases this verse as follows: "Death in one's own law of nature is better for a man than victory in an alien movement. To follow the law of another's nature is dangerous to the soul." (*Essays on the Gītā*, p. 466) The political implications of these words are very clear.

day."[34] He began his battle for *swaraj* (self-government) which he claimed to be his birthright through the editorial columns of these papers. He relentlessly attacked the westernising social reformers and the inert spirit of orthodoxy. In all these, Aurobindo and Tilak had a common mind and Aurobindo was known in certain circles as "the lieutenant of Tilak."[35] Tilak entered the political arena with a firm conviction in the future of Hinduism and India. He says, "It has (Hinduism) lasted so long because it is founded on everlasting Truth and eternal and pure doctrines relating to the Supreme Being."[36] He believed that the re-awakening and freedom of India depends on the revival of her religion and the restoration of her ancient glory. These are interdependent, as he viewed history. He asks, "How can a man be proud of the greatness of his own nation if he feels no pride of his own religion?"[37]

Tilak was quick to realize that the causes of India's backwardness lay in the degraded aspects of the spirit of orthodoxy such as lethargy, indolence, exclusiveness and inaction. He was determined to teach the masses the real meaning of *Sanātana Dharma*. Popularisation of religious festivals like *Ganesh Pūja* provided him with a forum to reach the masses. Making the *Gītā* his text, he re-taught the people the *dharma* of action. With all the power at his command he castigated the pundits who preached the philosophy of life-negation and withdrawal from the world in search of *mukti*. He maintained that atrophied orthodoxy had no religious justification. "Its spirit was in part the perversion and negetion of the world and of the classical concept of fulfilment of the purpose of life, the union of man with his creator."[38] From his great knowledge of the Vedas and the *Gītā*, he brings out a new meaning of *mukti* and *dharma* for the Indian people. He writes:

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[34]Theodore L. Shay, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

[35]Cf. Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

[36]S.V. Bapat (ed,) *Gleanings from Tilak's Writings and Speeches*, p. 118.

[37]*Ibid.*, p. 326.

[38]Quoted by Theodore L. Shay, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

> If a man seeks unity with the Deity, he must necessarily seek unity with the interests of the world also, and work for it. If he does not, then the unity is not perfect, because there is union between elements out of the three (man and Deity) and the third (the world) is left out. I have thus solved the question for myself and I hold that serving the world, and thus serving His Will, is the surest way of Salvation, and this way can be followed by remaining in the world and not going away from it.[39]

We see a systematic treatment of these ideas in his *Gītā-Rahasya*, especially in his concept of *lokasaṁgraha*.

Gītā-Rahasya, as we have discussed elsewhere, brings out the meaning of *Karmayoga*. Since it was written in a British jail in Burma, the political message of this great commentary is very subdued. Throughout this book we see a challenge to face one's battle of life with courage. He says again and again, drawing from the words of Kṛṣṇa, that it is wrong to shrink from one's appointed duty, afraid of the consequences. He writes:

> The *Gītā* asks us to work in imitation of the Lord, for the purpose of *Lokasaṁgraha* or the greatest good of the greatest number—the unification of humanity in universal sympathy. The *Gītā* is designed to provide a solution to all human problems. It reconciles and harmonizes spiritual freedom with work in the world.[40]

Translated into political terms, this is a clarion call to take active part in the national struggle for *swarāj* and for the service of the masses. He also voiced his opposition to the westernized reformers and the western system of education in Indian schools. If the reformers and the educational system they championed became successful, he "feared that the classical values of India would be lost, that the moral stamina of the people would be undermined, and the national will would be broken."[41] With this in mind, he writes:

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[39]B.G. Tilak, *His Writings and Speeches*, p. 263.
[40]B.G. Tilak, *Gītā-Rahasya*, p. 688.
[41]Theodore L. Shay, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

> As the works of purely materialistic philosophers on Ethics are principally taught in our colleges the fundamental principles of the *Karma-Yoga*, mentioned in the *Gītā*, are not well understood even by learned persons among us, who have had an English education.[42]

Turning to the social reformers he says, ". . . our present downfall is due not to Hindu religion but to the fact that we have absolutely forsaken religion."[43]

The nationalists were aware that sacrifice would be an important element in the quest for freedom. They turned to the religious concept of *yajña* (sacrifice) and related it to the political plane. Tilak, expounding the *Gītā* idea of *yajña* writes, "Whatever a man does, must be taken to have been done by him for the purpose of the '*yajña*' (sacrifice). . . In as much as the Vedas themselves have enjoyed the performance of *yajña*, any Action done for the purpose of the *yajña* cannot of itself be a source of bondage to man."[44] When the *Gītā-Rahasya* first appeared in Marathi, its readers very well knew how to read between the lines of statements like this and pick up the political message in the national context. In fact, the editorial columns of *Kesari* has been teaching the Maharashtrians to look beyond the apparent meaning of words. Aurobindo expresses the same idea of sacrifice much more forcefully. He writes:

> Liberty is the fruit we seek from the sacrifice, and the Motherland, the Goddess to whom we offer it; into the seven leaping tongues of the fire of the *Yajña* we must offer all that we are and all that we have, feeding the fire even with our blood and lives and happiness of our nearest and dearest; for the Motherland is a Goddess who loves not a maimed and imperfect sacrifice, and freedom was never won from the gods by a grudging giver.[45]

These political massages, clothed in the familiar religious language aroused the masses for unified action. The reli-

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[42]B.G. Tilak, *Gītā-Rahasya*, p. 93.
[43]S.V. Bapat, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
[44]B.G. Tilak, *Gītā-Rahasya*, p. 72.
[45]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance*, pp. 77-78.

gious nature of the sacrifice and the ultimate reward it offered, turned political action into a spiritual experience for many.

When the Indian National Congress launched the programme of boycott, that is, boycotting all foreign goods, Tilak and Aurobindo established a philosophical and ethical basis for it, citing the teachings of the *Gītā*. In his article "The Morality of Boycott" he says, "The *Gītā* is the best answer to those who shrink from battle as a sin and aggression as a lowering of morality."[46] He refers to the *swadharma* of the Kṣatriya and reminds him that it is his duty to fight in times of war and boycott being a kind of war, violence therein is justifiable. Though the burning of British goods is illegal according to the British law, which is an alien *dharma* in any case, it has ethical sanction.[47] According to him, justice and righteousness are the atmosphere of political morality not the penal codes created by the rulers to protect their own interest. Tilak too emphasized the meaning of *swadharma* in many of his speeches and writings. For him *swarāj* is his *dharma* and any means to achieve it is a moral means. In one of his speeches at a Shivaji festival, he justified the murder of Afzal Khan by Shivaji, the leader of the Marathas, on the basis of the ethics of the *Gītā*. He says, ". . . Shrimat Krishna preached in the *Gītā* that we have a right even to kill our own *guru* and kinsmen. No blame attaches to any person if he is doing deeds without being actuated by a desire to reap the fruits of his deeds."[48] He developed these ideas much more systematically in the *Gītā-Rahasya*, expounding different aspects of this philosophy of the *Gītā* in relation to the Indian context of the twentieth century. After discussing in detail the meaning of *dharma* and *swadharma* he says, "The Blessed Lord had to show the importance and the necessity of performing at all costs the duties enjoined by one's *Dharma* while life lasts."[49] As a deeply religious person he was aware

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[46] *Ibid.*, 81.
[57] Cf. *loc. cit.*
[48] Quoted by Stanley A. Wolpert, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
[49] B.G. Tilak, *Gītā-Rahasya*, p. 37.

that political action alone will not usher in *swarāj*. He writes, "... we are doing good work and God is helping us and the religious instinct and the blessings of saints are at work."[50] Some statements like the above from Tilak and Aurobindo lend covert support to political violence and subversion. In fact, as V.P. Varma observes, "The use of the teachings of the Vedanta and the *Gītā* for the support of political violence has been a fairly common feature of modern Indian political thought, except in the mighty antithesis of the Gandhian *Ahiṁsā*."[51]

Though there is a remarkable similarity between Aurobindo's earlier ideas of political action and those of Gandhi, the ultimate difference between them is significant. This difference is pronounced in their interpretations of the *Gītā*. It was the idea of *lokasaṁgraha* in the *Gītā* which inspired Tilak, Aurobindo and Gandhi. While Tilak and Gandhi emphasise the social and political aspect of service with supreme insistence on non-attachment, Aurobindo moves towards the doctrine of transfiguration of man into a willing agent of the divine, and hence he preaches spiritualized, divine action. But Gandhi stands apart from both Tilak and Aurobindo in his application of the concept of non-violence to national issues and the symbolic interpretation of the *Gītā*. Gandhi, in many waws, was the political heir of Gokhale and he had more in common with the "Moderates" than with the "Extremists." But, as we have seen above, he tried to establish an identity of interests between religion and politics. His insistence on the purity of the means for attaining *swarāj* and ethical consistency gave a new direction to the national movement. Though he used the *Gītā* to impart his doctrines of *ahiṁsā* and *satyāgraha*, he was very careful not to isolate religious minorities from the political movement. Thus, he was a force of moderation in carrying the minority communities with the freedom movement.

Gandhi entered politics, with the conviction that it is his moral and religious duty. In all his political campaigns, *ahiṁsā* was his ethical creed. He was against all form of

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[50]S.V. Bapat, *op. cit.*, p. 121,

[51]Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

violence, "not on grounds of efficacy, but on grounds of moral indefensibility."[52] To him, ethical purity was as important as political success. In his writings we do not find any pleas for *swarāj* on the basis of natural right, which was a strong element in western nationalism at an earlier period. On the other hand, basing his arguments on the teachings of the *Gītā* he says that "the true source of right is duty"[53] and "the right to perform one's duties is the only right worth living for and dying for. It covers all legitimate rights."[54] Gandhi's development of the *Gītā* concept of *yajña* in relation to the national movement had a wider meaning than what we find in Tilak and Aurobindo. To him "*yajña* is laying down one's life so that others may live."[55] He boldly applies this idea to nationalism and says," . . . My idea of nationalism is that my country may die so that the human race may live. There is no room for race-hatred here."[56] As Gandhi, admits, "politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion."[57] His religion drew no line of demarcation between salvation and worldly pursuits. He writes, "I have felt that the *Gītā* teaches us that what cannot be followed in day-to-day practice cannot be called religion."[58] His application of the ethical principles, especially the teachings he derived from the *Gītā*, elevated the national movement into a higher place. Gandhi's theory that the end could not be separated from the means, as Nehru observes, has been "one of his greatest contributions to our public life." He continues, "The idea is by no means new, but this application of an ethical doctrine to large-scale public activity was certainly novel.' [59]

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[52]Theodore L. Shay, *Op. Cit.*, p. 155.

[53]M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, (Selections) Vol. II, p. 479.

[54]M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, (May 27, 1939) p. 143.

[55]M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, (Sept. 8, 1927) p. 28.

[56]Quoted by Gopinath Dhawan in *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, p. 326.

[57]Quoted by Chandrashankar Shukla in *Gandhi's View of Life*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1956, p. 133.

[53]M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 132.

[59]J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, John Day, New York, 1945, p. 17.

Religious Revivals and the Gita

The cultural and religious changes of recent centuries which are sometimes called a revival of Hinduism or an Indian renaissance, were the direct result of the encounter between two civilizations. India stood face to face with Europe for almost two centuries. In this encounter there was also a subsidiary encounter, although along very different lines between Indian spirituality and the religion associated with the West. According to Arnold Toynbee's interpretation of history, this long encounter and the interaction should have served as the chrysalis of "a higher civilization" and "a higher religion." But this was not to be the case in the sub-continent, though the early reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj showed signs of assimilating the best in the two cultures and religions. By the end of the nineteenth century, Indian renaissance exhibited two different tendencies. The moderates in the national movement joined hands with the social reformers and insisted that the salvation of Hinduism lay in eradicating the evil customs of the society through legislation and other means. R.G. Bhandarkar, who was President of the Social Conference describes social reform as "a complete scheme of national regeneration for India rather than as a partial scheme for carrying out repairs in some part of the social structure."[60] The nationalistic extremists, on the other hand, were strongly opposed to the programme of the reformers. Tilak and Aurobindo, completly identified themselves with the revivalists like Bepin Chandra Pal and Lajpat Rai. K. Natarajan observes that these leaders came to the political limelight through their vigourous campaign against the social reformers.[61] In Tilak's view reforms must not "be inspired by a small group of reformers and enforced upon the community by the power of an alien state."[62] Aurobindo was equally suspicious of the reformers. He felt that they "aimed at a successful reproduction of Europe in India."[63] He writes:

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[60]Quoted by K. Natarajan in *A Century of Social Reform in India*, Asia Publishing House, New York, 1962, p. 109.

[61]Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

[62]Theodore L. Shay, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

[63]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*. p. 25.

> They [the reformers] sought for a bare, simplified and rationalized religion, created a literature which imparted very eagerly the forms, ideas and whole spirit of their English models...would have revolutionized Indian society by introducing into it all the social ideas and main features of the European forms.[64]

By the beginning of this century, the reformers became a small minority and Indian renaissance turned toward revivalism. Neil J. Smelser's definition of revival very well applies to the twentieth century phase of Indian revival. He defines, "A revival as we use the term involves an enthusiastic re-definition of religious methods, but not a challenge to basic religious values."[65] What Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, *et. al.*, attempted was a "re-definition of religious methods" with a view to dealing with modern problems "in the light of the inspiration of a re-discovered Indian spirit."[66] Behind this religio-national urge to grasp the past, there was a powerful psychological factor which should be taken into account. Most leaders of the revival were subjected to "widespread internalization of western norms", as Ashis Nandi observes. This created a crisis of identity. Nandi writes, "As values began changing in the exposed sectors of the community, individuals began judging themselves in terms of newly acquired standards and found themselves wanting."[67] It is this deeper level of personality crisis that led to the split between the moderates and the extremists in the national movement. The aggressive nature of revivalism also represents an attempt to deal with national problems. Nandi says:

> Identification with the nation here helps one to restore self-esteem by projecting one's unacceptable self on to scapegoats within and outside the system. The major

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[64]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 35.

[65]Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, Free Press, New York, 1963, p. 173.

[66]Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

[67]Ashis Nandi, "The Culture of Indian Politics: A Stock taking" in the *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. XXX, No. 1 (1970) p. 59.

> elements of this style are the imageries associated with the nation: the conception of a motherland by identifying with whose aggressive motherliness one could restore the sense of infantile omnipotence.[68]

The Śakti cult of Bengal provided the most conspicuous religious imageries for these particular expressions of patriotism and revivalism.

The leaders of revivalism turned to the *Gītā* for the "redefinition of religious methods" and for the "recovery of the spiritual gospel of the land," than to any other text. The reasons for the elevation of this non-*śruti* text "as the supreme scripture of Hinduism"[69] have to be sought in the very nature of the evolution of Neo-Vedanta or Vedantic spiritualism, as Aurobindo would have it, in this century. Beginning from Vivekananda, who is considered by many as the prophet of new India, the old ideas of the Vedanta has been interpreted for social and political purposes. He considered the Vedanta as the philosophical background of Hinduism and took upon himself the task of preaching it to the world. The *Gītā* being a Vedantic text, provided ample room for a new interpretation of the Vedantic ideals, in relation to the modern world. Besides, the snythetic philosophy of the *Gītā* was considered by the revivalists as an ideal matrix for a new synthesis of various schools of Hinduism. Though Vivekananda did not write a commentary on the *Gītā*, he has given several talks on it. He acknowledges its greatness in the following words: "Compared with that (the Upaniṣads which contain many irrelevant subjects) the *Gītā* is like these truths beautifully arranged together in their proper places—like a fine garland or a bouquet of the choicest of flowers."[70] He observes that the reconciliation of the different paths of *dharma*, and work without desire or attachment are the two special characteristics of the *Gītā*.[71] It is precisely on these characteristics that later commentators

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[68]*Ibid.*, p. 78.

[69]K.M. Panikkar, *Hinduism and West*, p. 33.

[70]Swami Vivekananda, *Thought on the Gītā*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1963, p. 8.

[71]Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

built their situational interpretation of this text.

Though the main thrust in Aurobindo's commentary is to "distinguish its [the *Gītā*'s] essential and living message . . . on which humanity has to seize for its perfection and its highest spiritual welfare,"[72] it shows a strong undercurrent of situational interpretation. His discussion of Kurukṣetra may be taken as an example. When we read his arguments and statements, against the background of his articles in *Bande-Mātaram*, they acquire a new meaning. He writes, "Evil cannot perish without the destruction of much that lives by the evil, and it is no less destruction even if we personally are saved the pain of a sensational action of violence."[73] One cannot but recall that it is the same Aurobindo who was once involved in political terrorism who makes this statement. A call to spiritual, that is religious, and national revival echoes all through his commentary. The concepts of "integral *yoga*" and "integral Advaitism" he develops through these essays find their culmination in his later works. But, basing arguments on the *Gītā*, he lays the groundwork for the development of a new philosophy which was to make great contributions to national, cultural and religious revivalism in later years.

Tilak's commentary on the *Gītā*, with its great emphasis on *Karmayoga* has awakened the people to the ethical and moral aspects of religious life. He believed that revival of Hinduism can be achieved only through educating the people in the great cultural traditions of India. In his view the classical values were thoroughly inter-mixed with popular religion and therefore "religious education will first and foremost engage our attention."[74] The popularisation of religious festivals in Maharashtra was part of this plan. These festivals provided him with a platform to resurrect the philosophy of activism from the verses of the *Gītā*. He was successful in establishing close contact with the masses and through these contacts he strengthened Indian consciousness

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[72]Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 8.
[73]*Ibid.*, p. 38.
[74]Quoted by Theodore L. Shay, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

and pride in Hindu traditions among them. Expounding the *Gītā* he points out that religion and practical life are not different. He declares, "To take *saṁnyasa* (renunciation) is not to abandon life. The real spirit is to make the country your family instead of working only for your own. The step beyond is to serve humanity and the next step is to serve God."[75] Since Tilak had not finally identified himself with any particular revivalist movement he had a wider appeal among the Hindus. It is clear that through all his political and literary activities, Tilak "is storming," as D. MacKenzie Brown observes, "primarily against contemporary 'escapist' Hinduism which, he believes, offers the false ideal of renunciation of all worldly activity by the seeker after *mokṣa*, or self-realization."[76]

Another national leader who turned to the *Gītā* to authenticate different facets of Hindu revivalism was Annie Besant. She came to India in 1893 as a Theosophist leader and remained so till death. Soon after arrival she plunged into the national movement. While recognizing the divisions that existed in India she urges that all religions be merged "by the theological recognition of all religions."[77] Unity of religions being a central theme of the neo-Vedantins, Mrs. Besant soon gained popularity among the revivalists. Like the extremists of Bengal she writes, "If there is to be an Indian nation, Patriotism and Religion must join hands in India."[78] In her earlier writings and speeches she extols the virtues of Hinduism without any reservations. "Her chief target," writes C.H. Heimsath, "for ridicule were social reformers, whose influence she regarded as debilitating."[79] The Reformists and their organ *Indian Social Reformer* took Mrs. Besant to task for her claims of spiritualism and her irrational approach to religion. After a few years her views

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[75]Quoted by D.P. Karmarkar in *Bal Gangadhar Tilak: A Study*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1956, p. 165.

[76]D. MacKenzie Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

[77]Annie Besant, *Nation Building*, Theosophical Society, Madras, 1917, p. 22.

[78]Quoted by Charles H. Heimsath in *Indian Nationalism and Social Reform*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1964, p. 315.

[79]*Ibid.*, p. 327.

on social reform began to change to the surprise of her admirers among the conservatives. She founded the Madras Hindu Association, "to promote Hindu social and religious advancement on national lines in harmony with the spirit of civilization." Later she took an active part in the National Congress and was elected to its presidency in 1918. But when Gandhi entered the political arena with his new techniques of agitation "she opposed the movement with unflinching courage."[80] This was very typical of Mrs. Besant, for most of her convictions and policies were subject to change. As Natarajan puts it, she ". . . was herself too much of a rebel to afford much satisfaction for any sustained period to the orthodox of any society."[81]

Though Annie Besant's translation with commentary of the *Gītā* was not published until 1923, she had been lecturing on the *Gītā* for a number of years. Her approach to, and interpretation of, the *Gītā* is in a way conditioned by her Theosophical motifs. She looked for the "unity of all religions" and finds support in this text. She held that the paths that are known as *karma, bhakti* and *jñāna* would lead ultimatelv to the realization of God. So she writes, "We see the three paths within the one and according to the dominant temperament will be the path that is chosen."[82] She thought that the separative instincts, whether of these three paths or of the diverse teachings of different religions, are born of the *asuraprakṛti*, the demoniacal nature. She says, "All that tends to division, all that is of hatred, all that is of separation, takes on the aspect of evil to the evolving man."[83] Commenting on *Bhagavadgītā* VII. 12, "The natures that are harmonious, active, slothful, these know as from me,"[84] she challenged India to move towards the path of unity. For, "That becomes evil which has in it

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[80]K. Natarajan, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

[81]*Ibid.*, p, 79.

[82]Annie Besant, *Hints on the Study of Bhagavad Gītā*, Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1906, p. 79.

[83]*Ibid.*, p. 117.

[84]*Ye cai 'va sāttvikā bhāvā rājasās tāmasās ca ye matta eva 'ti tān viddhi na tv ahaṁ teṣu te mayi* (*Bhagavad Gītā*, VII, 12)

the principle of separation, because the time for separation is over, and the time for working towards unity is come."[85]

Mrs. Besant presents the *Gītā* as a "Great Unveiling" of history, "the drawing away of the evil that covers the real scheme which history works out on the physical plane; for it was that which removed the delusion of Arjuna and made him able to do his duty at Kurukshetra."[86] She sees in the revelation of the *Gītā* "the preparations for the India of the present" as well as "the preparation for the India of the future."[87] Like her great contemporary, Vivekananda, she extols the greatness of Hinduism and India. Thus, "It [India] had served as the model, the world model, for a nation. This was its function. A religion, embracing the heights and depths of human thought, able to teach the *ryot* (peasant) in his field, able to teach the philosopher and the metaph ysician in his secluded study, a world-embracing religion, had been proclaimed through the lips of the Ṛṣis of this first offshot of the Race."[88] She declares, like the neo-Vedantins, that the *Gītā* provides a particular path, a *yoga*, for each one according to one's temperament and inclination.[89] As a Theosophist, she finds the oneness of Godhead and oneness of humanity in the message of *Gītā*. So she writes, "One Lord and therefore one humanity; one Lord and therefore oneness through the entire body of the Lord, one Lord, one world, one brotherhood, that is the outcome of our study . . . Thus on from age to age, from universe to universe, and where, I say again, where is grief, where delusion, when thus we have seen the Oneness."[90]

S. Radhakrishnan, whose services to Hinduism and Indian philosophy have been immense, observes in his commentary that the *Gītā* is a "powerful shaping factor in the renewal of spiritual life and has secured an assured place among the world's great scriptures."[91] His presentation of the *Gītā*

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[85]Annie Besant, *Hints on the Study of Bhagavadgītā*, p. 116.
[86]*Ibid.*, p. 9.
[87]*loc. cit.*
[88]*Ibid*, p. 11.
[89]*Ibid.*, p. 96.
[90]*Ibid.*, p. 130.
[91]S. Radhakrishnan, *Tbe Bhagavadgītā*, p. 12.

as a "valuable aid for the understanding of the supreme ends of life"[92] has contributed in no small measure to a new self-understanding of Hinduism. His commentary by and large expounds the philosophy of the *Gītā* in the Vedantic mould. But, its special feature lies in his attempt to assimilate and integrate modern thought, that is western thought, into the system of the *Gītā*. He says, "The rules are not ends in themselves, for union with the Supreme is the final goal. The teacher of the *Gītā* reconciles the different systems in vogue and gives us a comprehensive eirenicon which is not local and temporary but is for all time and all men."[93]

The patterns we have seen in these commentaries of national importance have been followed by scores of commentators in various regional languages. On the religious level the recurring themes of their writers are unity of religions and the synthesis of the various *yogas* of the *Gītā*. C.V. Vasudeva Bhattathiry, a Malayalam commentator writes, "There are a number of scriptures which deal with *jñāna*, *bhakti* and *karma yogas*. But it is only in the *Gītā* we see a harmonious blending of all these *yogas*."[94] Discussing the universality of the *Gītā*, Puthezhath Rama Menon says, "The *Gītā* does not insist on the acceptance of any particular doctrine or means for salvation. . . . What matters is not the particular way of worship, but the mentality with which one approaches the Lord. . . . No prophet or founder of religion ever ventured to declare like Kṛṣṇa, 'In whatever way men approach me, even so do I reward them; My path do men tread in all ways, O Arjuna' (*Bhagavadgītā* IV. 11)."[95] He contrasts the "universalism" of the *Gītā* with the scriptures of other religions which claim exclusiveness.[96] This has been the general trend of the revivalists who turned to the *Gītā* as an instrument of national and religious revival in this cen-

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[92]*Ibid.*, p. 6.

[93]*Ibid.*, p. 75.

[94]C.V. Vasudeva Bhattathiry, *Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā*, p, 4. (my translation.)

[95]Puthezhath Rama Menon, *Gītāprāntangalil* (Malayalam) Sri Ramakrishnasrama, Trichur, 1967, p. 52-53. (my translation).

[96]Cf. *loc. cit.*

tury. They are one in affirming that the *Gītā* provides the greatest degree of freedom of thought and action.[97]

Gospel of Modern Hinduism

The classical commentators of the *Gītā*, Śankara, Ramānuja, *et. al.*, approached the *Gītā* as a *smṛti* text which confirms and expounds the teachings of the *śruti*. In this, the relationship of the *Gītā* is one of dependence on the *śruti*, as inference depends on perception. For the Vedantins, *śruti* is the only source of knowledge of Brahman and *dharma* and the texts which expounds this original revelation are secondary. Most modern commentators of the *Gītā* do not take into serious account the non-canonical position of the *Gītā* among the Hindu scriptures. On the other hand, an attempt has been made to present the *Gītā* as the gospel of Hinduism. Among the modern revivalists, Dayananda Saraswati is the only possible exception to this trend. His call was to return to the Vedas. He holds that the excellence of the Vedas had been obscured by the accumulated untruth of the bulk of post-Vedic *smṛti* literature.[98]

The leaders of national and religious revival whom we have been discussing chose the *Gītā* as their doctrinal *vade-mecum*. They were fully aware of the canonical status—which is less than the highest—of this book and yet presented the *Gītā* as the text which deals with the essence of Hinduism. Gandhi treats the *Gītā* as the key to understand all other scriptures, including the Vedas.[99] He considers the *Gītā* as his spiritual mother. He writes, "The Vedas and the *smritis* are of no avail to me. I then approach the Mother (the *Gītā*) and say, 'Mother these learned Pandits have put me in a predicament. Help me out of this perplexity'."[100] In many of his writings we see an insistence that the *Gītā* is the gospel of Hinduism. "The main reason for his insistence," observes A. Bharati, ". . . should be sought in the

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[97]Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

[98]H.B. Sarda, (ed.) *Dayananda Commemoration Volume*, The Vedic Yantralaya, Ajmer, 1933, p. 407.

[99]Cf. M.K. Gandhi, *Teachings of the Gītā*, p. 44.

[100]*Ibid.*, p. 45.

homogeneous applicability of its tenets: for whereas it is quite impossible to interpret the Upaniṣads and the other canonical texts socio-centrically, the *Gītā* lends itself to social moralizing."[101] The same reason, in varying degrees applies to the approach of Tilak, Aurobindo and others. Tilak, in his preface to the commentary makes his position clear on the authority of the *Gītā*. He writes:

> . . . the *Gītā* expounds the root principles of the present Religion. . . . it may well be said that there is no other work in the whole Sanskrit literature, which explains the principles of the present Hindu religion in as succinct and yet as clear and unambiguous a manner as the *Gītā*.[102]

He attests the popular saying "it is quite enough if one thoroughly studies the *Gītā*; what is the use of dabbling in other *śāstras*."[103] Aurobindo also contributes to the pre-eminence of the *Gītā*. He calls the *Gītā*, "the world's greatest Scripture, a powerful shaping factor in the revival of a nation and a culture."[104]

This approach has been followed by every commentator of the *Gītā* who takes his stand in the revivalist line. Some of them carry it even further and place the *Gītā* above the *śurti* in their enthusiasm for the *Gītā*. K.M. Munshi who has made a great contribution to the religious revival in the post-independent era, writes, "The essence of the Word spoken by the masters all over the world is found in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the inspired Word of Sri Krishna."[105] He sees the *Gītā*, as the Word (*vāc*) which keeps the flame of *Dharma* alive in India. He asserts, "India has survived because millions in this land, inspired directly or indirectly by the idea enshrined in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, have tried age after age to capture it

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[101]A. Bharati, "Gandhi's Interpretation of the *Gītā*, An Anthropological Analysis," in *Gandhi, India and the World, An International Symposium*, ed. by Sibnarayan Ray, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1970, p. 60.

[102]B.G. Tilak, *Gītā-Rahasya*, p. xxv.

[103]*gītā sugītā kartavyā kim anyaiḥ śāstra viṣarih. (loc. cit.)*

[104]A Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 5.

[105]KM. Munshi, *Bhagavadgītā and Modern Life*, p. 24.

afresh by personal experience."[106] Vinoba Bhave also takes this approach to the *Gītā*. He says, "From ancient times the *Gītā* has been given the status of an Upanisad. . . . Almost every idea necessary for the flowering of a full life occurs in the pages of the *Gītā*."[107] He sees the *Gītā* as a text which contains saving knowledge which dispels "the dark illusion that covers the heart of humanity."[108]

Statements such as the above by leaders in the context of religious and national revival produced a generation of *Gītā* commentators and writers who found in the *Gītā* every conceivable idea, religious, philosophical, political and even economic. For want of a better term we may call them "the *Gītā* alchemists". This trend towards "the *Gītā* alchemy" is evident in the writing of Gandhi himself. He found support in the *Gītā* for his doctrines of non-violenc, equality, bread labour, *swadeshi* and even fasting.[109] The elevation of the *Gītā* to the position of a "super scripture" also created a tendency among Indian leaders to cite it in and out of context. Let us take one example to illustrate this. V.K.R.V. Rao, a former minister of the Government of India, in his paper "Some Probems confronting Traditional Societies in the Process of Development" discusses the conceptions of human equality and social responsibility and notes that these concepts are finding progressively more extensive recognition in practice. Then he observes, ". . . it is also a fact that we have outbursts of savagery that set the clock back from time to time, though scientific progress proceeds without interruption." In this context he tries to relate the *Gītā* doctrine of *avatāra* and cites the famous verse.[110] He says, "That is perhaps the reason for the Hindu

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[106]*Ibid.*, p. 20.

[107]Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gītā*, p. 3.

[108]*Ibid.*, p.10.

[109]Cf. Gandhi interprets the verse "*viṣayā vinivartante nirāhārasya dehinah*" (II. 59) to support his idea of fasting. This verse really refers to the person who abstains from the objects of senses, *viṣaya*. The *Gīiā* does not refer to fasting in the sense Gandhi used in his political campaigns.

[110]*Bhagavadgītā* IV. 8 (quoted above).

theory of *avatārs*, the Divine Being appearing in human form from time to time to re-expound the moral law and to restore its recognition in human society."[111] Here is a case of an eminent Indian economist and educationalist turning to "the *Gītā* alchemy."

Monks and *sādhus* of the various religious orders in India and not a few teachers of Indian philosophy have played their part in popularising the *Gītā* as the gospel of Hinduism. Some of them present the *Gītā* as "the universal scripture for all people of all temperaments and for all times."[112] Swami Sivananda says, "The *Gītā* is the cream of the Vedas . . . He who drinks the nectar of the *Gītā* through purification of the heart and meditation attains immortality."[113] Haridas Chaudhuri agrees with Aldous Huxley that the *Gītā* is "the most systematic scriptural statement of the Perennial Philosophy"[114] and goes on to assert that the *Gītā* "formulates the universal guiding principles of human conduct, shows us how we can resolve our spiritual crises and ethical conflicts with reference to the ultimate goal of life, and thus transcends in its central message, the boundaries of East and West."[115] The monastic orders popularised the *Gītā* through commentaries as well as through their periodicals. One has only to turn the pages of *The Vedanta Kesari* (Madras), *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* (Calcutta), etc., to see the importance given to the *Gītā*.

Another means adopted by certain monastic orders to popularise the *Gītā* has been the annual conducting of "*Gītā Gyāna Yajña*" in different centres of India. The Chinmaya Mission of Swami Chinmayananda has been the pioneer in

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[111]V.K.R.V. Rao, "Some Problems confronting Traditional Societies in the Process of Development," in *Tradition and Modernity in India*, Edited by A.B. Shah and C.R.M. Roa, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1965, p. 61.

[112]Swami Sivananda, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. xvi.

[113]*Ibid.*, p. xvii.

[114]Aldous Huxley's "Introduction" to *The Song of God: The Bhagavadgītā*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda, Harper, New York, 1951, p. 18.

[115]Haridas Chaudhuri, "The *Gītā* and Its Message for Humanity" in *Phtlosophy East and West*, Vol. V. No. 3 (Oct. 1955) p. 245.

this movement. The present writer attended one of the "*Gītā Gyāna Yajñas*" in Bangalore in 1972. These *yajñas* are meetings resembling "evangelistic crusades" with the colourful touch of Indian ceremonies, such as the ceremonial reception of the chief *Sevak* (literally servant). The Swamis who deliver discourses are called *sevaks*. *Bhajans* (hymns) are sung by the congregation and the discourses are really sermons based on the verses of the *Gītā*. The meetings go on for several days at a place and the enthusiasm with which hundreds of people attend these *yajñas* are a demonstration of the popularity of the *Gītā* among the Indian masses. The speakers at these meetings take special pains to relate the teachings of the *Gītā* to the everyday life of the people. The souvenirs published in connection with the *Gītā yajña* carry testimonies from people who have "found light" through the mission of the swami. The 1962 souvenir of the Bangalore *yajña* contains the testimony of a Roman Catholic. From time to time individuals spring up claiming to embody the *Gītā* teaching in practical life completely. A recent such phenomenon is Sri Chinmaya of whom M.S. Gnanasoundari writes:

> Jesus Christ preached religion. Sri Chinmaya is metamorphosing the minds of men and women to 'practice' religion. He has made the verbal Vedanta of our times from the realms of theory, more living, intense and practical.[116]

This again, is a new trend of the Hindu revivalism based on the teachings of the *Gītā*.

Though most of the leaders of the national revival speak of the *Gītā* as the text of Hinduism or the gospel of Hinduism, they have not made any serious attempt to theorize on the higher position even over the Vedas to which they have in practice elevated the *Gītā*. The Vedas have been accepted as revealed scriptures on the strength of the most authoritative tradition. The Hindu tradition, as we have seen

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[116]M.S. Gnanasoundari, "I am the Way," in 103rd *Geeta Gyana Yajna Souvenir*, Bangalore, 1962, p. 45.

above, ascribes to the *Gītā* the status of *smṛti* only. V.R. Kalyanasundara Śastri through his series of articles on "The *Gītā* and the Upaniṣads" (*The Vedanta Kesari*, Vol. LV. No. 1 —Vol. LVI. No. 12) advances the argument that "the *Gītā* has the supreme status of an Upaniṣad."[117] His arguments may be summarised as follows. The *Gītā* is related to the *Mahābhārata* in the same way as the Upaniṣads are related to the Vedas. The *Gītā* has been rightly characterised as the Upaniṣad of the *Mahābhārata*. The expression, *Bhagavad-gītāṣu upaniṣatsu* at the end of each chapter of the *Gītā* is significant. The word Upaniṣad means *Brahmavidya or Ātma-vidya*, that is the knowledge of Brahman or Atman. The *Gītā* being the Upaniṣad of the *Mahābhārata*, it too deals with *Brahma-vidya* and therefore deserves to be placed in the status of other Upaniṣads. "Just as the Upaniṣads are the utterances of the Lord, so is the *Gītā* the utterance of the Lord."[118] He cites Śankara's statement that the *Gītā* has, in a condensed form, the essence of the Vedas,[119] to support his argument. It is certainly not the case, however, that Śankara and other *ācāryas* consider a "summary" of the teachings of the Vedas as important as the Vedas themselves.

In the Indian national revival, political, social and religious, the leaders demonstrated a sense of national pride which the late M.N. Roy seeing through his Marxist-internationalist eyes used to describe as "cultural imperialism."[120] Roy was prejudiced in favour of internationalism and hence could not probably see the genuine Indian heritage sympathetically. But he is still probably right in calling for acknowledgement of debt to ideas from other cultures and to a halt to the practice of regarding however revered a text to be all-sufficing. As V.P. Varma observes, the statement that "the Indian classics contain the climax of philosophic wisdom"[121] may be true in the metaphysical sense. But when

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[117]V.R. Kalyanasundara Sastri, "The *Gītā* and the Upaniṣads" in *The Vedanta Kesari*, Vol. LV. No. 1 (May 68) p. 60.

[118]*loc. cit.*

[119]*tadidam Gītāśāstraṁ samastavedārthasārasaṁgrahabhutaṁ.*

[120]Cf. Ashis Nandi, *op. cit*,, p. 77.

[121]Viswanath Prasad Varma, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

this in turn creates "a strong belief that the key to political progress and social organization lies in the ancient classics of India,"[122] the foundations would seem rather shaky. This would only lead to cultural stagnation. Aurobindo himself acknowledges at one stage that one of the important aspects of Indian renaissance is accepting whatever is sound and true. He writes:

> [Renaissance] is rather a process of new creation in which the spiritual power of the Indian mind remains supreme, recovers its truths, accepts whatever it finds sound or true, useful or inevitable of the modern idea and form, but so transmutes and Indianises it, so absorbs and so transforms it entirely into itself that its foreign character becomes another harmonious element in the characteristic working of the ancient goddess, the Shakti of India mastering and taking possession of the modern influence no longer possessed or overcome by it.[123]

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[122] *loc. cit.*

[123] Aurobindo Ghose, *The Renaissance in India*. p. 31.

CHAPTER VI

The Gita and Ideologies

The impact of the West upon India embraced all aspects of national life. The assault extended to the religious realm also, although here the inroads were subtler they nevertheless threatened to erode the foundations of India's traditional life. In the secular field the invasion was more overt and it affected both ideas and social organisation. To a great extent India accepted and assimilated the ideas and the ideologies which the West represented. At the same time, this assault on the soul of India by western culture and values through western education[1] and the British paramountcy created a sense of genuine threat among the Indian people. Dhirendra Narain, an Indian sociologist, sees even the rise of an inferiority complex because of this. Whether he is right or not is a matter of debate. He observes:

> The most pervasive impact of English rule (and, previously, of Muslim rule) on our character was to create a feeling of national inferiority and inadequacy. Without this backdrop of our sense of national inferiority, nothing contemporary in India can be understood.[2]

The new leaders felt the need for strengthening the foundations of Indian life, which called for a new self-consciousness. This latter end could be achieved only by forging sufficiently forceful ideologies raised on interpretations of sacred scriptures of the land. In this effort many things from the West had to be accepted. Indian national leaders, the conservatives and the radicals alike, required some ideological

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[1]Edward Shils, "Culture of the Indian Intellectual," *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. LXVII, p. 255.

[2]Dhirendra Narain, "Indian National Character in the Twentieth Century," *Annals of the American Academic of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol. 370, (March 1967), p. 127.

stands that would allow them to criticize those aspects of western civilization which were responsible for the subjugation of the Indian people. These, they hoped, would serve to liberate the Indian people from the new threat stemming from the many-sided imperialism, and at the same time arm them in their struggle for the liberation of India.[3] While some of them turned to Marxism, leaders like Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Vinoba and others turned to the *Gītā* to reshape the ideology of *dharma* by appealing directly to *mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa* and the view of metaphysical Reality that is implied in them. These leaders turned to the *Gītā* primarily because it provides the framework for the development of religious, social and political ideologies which could meet the challenges of the West and by implication that of modernity. It also provides greater freedom of interpretation than any other text, because by its very nature it is synthetic.

Towards a Definition of Ideology

The use of the term "ideology" may be misleading because the word has meant many things to many people. In popular usage, the best known "ideologies" are socialism and communism "each of which refers to a highly organized system of beliefs and values about society as it is and as it should be."[4] Ideology in this sense, as Scott points out, "is apart from individuals and has an independent existence regardless of whether it is accepted in whole or part by any individual."[5] J.C. Scott makes a distinction between this form of ideology—which he calls "formal ideology"—as against "personal ideology". He defines personal ideology as "an organization of opinions, attitudes and values—a way of thinking about man and society."[6] This definition vastly differs from David E. Apter's exposition and definition of

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[3]Cf. Dennis Dalton, "Gandhi and Roy: The Interaction of Ideologies, "in *Gandhi, India and the World, An International Symposium*, edited by Sibnarayan Ray, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1970, p. 160.

[4]James C. Scott, *Political Ideology in Malaysia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1968, p. 31.

[5]*loc. cit.*,

[6]*loc. cit.*,

ideology. Apter sees an affinity between ideology and outrage and goes on to assert that the "vaguest of ideologies can be made to shine in the reflected glow of moral indignation."[7] To him, each place and nation has its own mood and special problems and these are expressed in ideologies. Apter says that ideology links "particular actions and mundane practices with a wider set of meanings and, by doing so lends a more honourable and dignified complexion to social conduct."[8] This, according to Apter, is a generous view. Here is one of the not-so-generous definitions of ideology by Apter:

> Ideology is a generic term applied to general ideas potent in specific situations of conduct: for example, not *any* ideals, only political ones; not *any* values, only those specifying a given set of preferences; not *any* beliefs, only those governing particular modes of thought. Because it is the link between action and fundamental belief, ideology hopes to make more explicit the moral basis of action. It is not a vulgar description of something more noble and sacred than itself, like a cartoon or a stained glass window.[9]

This definition, in our view, applies only to "formal ideologies," and that too in a very narrow sense. Apter becomes dogmatic just like the ideologue whom he criticizes when he asserts, "Any ideology can become political" and "Political ideology is an application of particular moral prescriptions to collectivities."[10]

In our use of the term "ideology" to discuss the "systematic scheme or coordinate body of ideas about human life and culture" (this is the dictionary definition of the term) which evolved from the *Gītā*, we will have to take a much wider view. Patrick Corbett's definition brings out this wider meaning of ideology. Corbett does not impose any restriction "upon the content of the beliefs that make up the ideo-

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[7]David E. Apter (ed.) *Ideology and Discontent*, Collier-MacMillan, London, 1964, p. 16.

[8]*loc. cit.*,

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 17.

[10]*loc. cit.*,

logy; on this usage ideologies may therefore be moral, religious or political, or these and any others mixed together.''[11] He defines ideology as follows:

> By 'ideology,' therefore, is meant here any intellectual structure consisting of: a set of beliefs about the conduct of life and the organization of society; a set of beliefs about man's nature and the world in which he lives; a claim that the two sets are independent, and a demand that those beliefs should be professed, and that claim conceded, by anyone who is to be considered a full member of a certain group. (An ideologist will therefore be a man who makes it his business to put such structures forward.)[12]

In the light of this definition, Gandhism, Aurobindoism, Sarvodaya are all ideologies, all of which to a great extent draw their strength from the religious and moral teachings of the *Gītā*. Before we turn to these specific *Gītā*-inspired ideologies, we should take note of certain aspects of ideology brought out in the studies of Edward Shils. This would also help us to locate the growth of different ideologies in India which are basically religious in their orientations.

"Ideology," writes Shils, "is one among the variety of comprehensive patterns of beliefs—cognitive and moral, about man, society and the universe in relation to man and society—which exist in differentiated societies."[13] Shils distinguishes other patterns of beliefs such as outlooks, creeds, movements of thought from ideologies. He characterizes ideologies with a high degree of explicitness of formulation over a very wide range of the objects with which they deal "for their adherents there is an authoritative and explicit promulgation."[14] "Ideologies" according to Shils, "speak for a transcendent entity—a stratum, a society, a species, or an ideal value—which is broader than the membership of the

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[11]Patrick Corbett, *Ideologies*, Hutchinson, London 1965, p. 12.

[12]*loc. cit.*,

[13]Edward Shils, *The Intellectuals and the Powers and other Essays*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972, p. 23.

[14]*loc. cit.*,

corporate entity."[15] Those who espouse ideologies, claim to act on behalf of an "ideal," and the beneficiaries of which always go beyond the members of the particular ideological group. Ideologies strive for the fuller realization of the "ideal" or for the realization of particular cognitive and moral values that exist in the society in which the ideology obtains. Shils holds that ideologies are responses to insufficient regard for some particular element "in the dominant outlooks and are attempts to place that neglected element in a more central position and to bring it into fulfilment."[16] Since the dominant outlooks are those that prevail in the environing society, ideologies have a natural affinity with the value system and the creeds that produce those value systems of that society.

One important feature of ideology which Shils brings out is the moral and ethical principles for which it stands. These principles are placed very high by the charismatic leaders who create ideologies. Thus, ideology "Seeks to sacrilize existence by bringing every part of it under the dominion of the right principles."[17] Along with this emphasis on "what is ultimately right and true," ideology seeks to intellectualize man's social, political and religious behaviour. "An ideology" says Shils, "is the product of the need for an intellectually imposed order on the world. The need for an ideology is an intensification of the need for a cognitive and moral map of the universe, which in a less intense and more intermittent form is a fundamental, although unequally distributed, disposition of man."[18] This must be the reason that in most traditions and cultures, the intellectuals are disposed towards an ideological outlook. An intellectualized religious philosophy like the Vedanta provides the ideal precondition for the emergence of ideology since it contains "explicit propositions about the nature of the sacred and its cultivation, which is what ideologies are about."[19] In this respect,

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[15] *Ibid* , p. 25.
[16] *loc. cit.*,
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[19] *Ibid* , p. 30.

the resources of the *Gītā* to provide a matrix for ideologies are enormous and the charismatic leaders of India turned to this text to articulate their visions of man and society.

There are four types of ideology as Harry M. Johnson lists them. They are conservative, counter-reform and revolutionary.[20] Ideologies which evolved from the *Gītā*, or constructed in reference to the basic religious orientations of the *Gītā* fall into all these types. According to Johnson the basic function of ideology "... is to define a particular programme of social action as legitimate and worthy of support."[21] This is a rather narrow role of ideology as we shall see later. However, it should be pointed out here that the main function of Indian ideology is to strive after salvation. Social or political action is only a part of this striving. "The supreme means of salvation," as J.G. Arapura points out, "in the Indian ideology is knowledge, *gnosis.*"[22] Many Indian writers, while admitting that India today has to accept the whole body of western social and political thought, would point out that spirituality has been the core of Indian thought, though in the day-to-day life of the Indian people this spiritual ideal is far from realized-[23] Discussing the impact of modern ideologies on Hindu social system, P.R. Srinivas asserts that the Indian society was able to withstand the onslaught of western ideologies because of the "comprehensiveness of the social thought that lay behind the

[20]Harry M. Johnson, "Ideology and the Social System" in *The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, p. 81.

[21]*loc. cit.*

[22]J.G. Arapura, "The Hindu Philosophy of Work," A CBC talk in the series *Ideas* in Feb. 1970 (unpublished).

[23]Dhirendra Narain, an Indian sociologist, analysing the Indian character frankly admits the gap between ideals and performance in India. He writes "Truth is extolled, but all kinds of falsehoods are practised; honesty is valued, but dishonesty is rampant, kindness is a virtue, but Indians laugh at others' physical deformity or discomfiture, the cow is sacred as mother, but is subjected to inhuman treatment; Indians eat beef abroad, but subscribe to the image of the sacred cow at home; Indians are spiritual, but their greed for material things is insatiable." (*op. cit.*, p. 130).

design and structure of the ancient Hindu society."[24] This comprehensiveness of the social thought, according to Srinivas, springs from the Vedantic ideology which declares the unity of *Brahman* and *Ātman*. This is a broader view of ideology than many sociologists are willing to concede. Nevertheless, we will follow these broad lines in our discussion of the Indian ideology.

National Ideals and National Ideology

During the long years of the Indian struggle for freedom, Gandhi projected the doctrine of Truth and Non-violence or Love as the national ideals. He insisted that every step in the national movement must be in tune with these great ideals. He clarifies his position *vis-a-vis* the British in the following words:

> Hatred will kill the national spirit . . . For my part I don't want the freedom of India if it means extinction of England or the disappearance of Englishmen. My love of nationalism is that my country may become free, that if need be the whole of the country die, so that the human race may live. There is no room for race hatred here. Let that be our nationalism.[25]

In the development of these national ideals Gandhi was really chanelling religious ideals, especially that of the *Gītā*, into the realm of politics. The implication of this was to raise politics from the realm of vulgar scramble for power to a spiritual pursuit, a spiritual pursuit which links political action with the "eternal *dharma*" of Hinduism. Gandhi's success in this, though very limited, left an aura of idealism to the Indian national movement. In the post-Gandhian period the Indian government itself tried to transform this idealism[26] in politics into a national ideology. The transformation of deals or idealism into an ideology was effected

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[24]P.R. Srinivas, "Hindu Sociology and Modern Ideologies," *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*, Vol. VI, No. 5, p. 117.

[25]Quoted by Damodar P. Singhal, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[26]We use the term idealism not in the metaphysical sense of Plato but in the popular sense of moral perfection.

by applying the same set of religious and ideological assumptions about the moral nature of man and society to governments and nations. This was the beginning of a new foreign policy based on a religious ideology, though not fully acknowledged, for India and a large group of Afro-Asian nations.

After India won her freedom under the leadership of Gandhi, the mood of the politicians was one of idealism and the national policies took an idealistic trend. "Idealism," as J.G. Arapura puts it "when applied to society is too simple an attitude to things."[27] Idealism being basically a state of mind, Indian leaders cast it into a rational mould, drawing heavily from Gandhian ideology and the religious motifs of India. In the field of foreign policy this took the form of "*Panchashila*," the five principles of mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and peaceful co-existence. These principles were accepted by a group of nations of the Third World which met at Bandung in 1955. At home, a group of Gandhians committed to his ideology embarked on a programme of rural reconstruction. We will discuss some salient features of this movement led by Vinoba Bhave later.

Indian leaders are at one in asserting that the policy of peaceful co-existence is in accord with the spirit of India's genius and the Gandhian ideology which evolved from this genius. Radhakrishnan says that the alternative to international anarchy is a world-wide system of justice, law and order. Then he goes on to add, "*Dharma* in Indian thought means a gathering in, a binding together, integration; *adharma* its opposite. . . ."[28] By implication this means that the Indian concept of *Dharma* is a binding force which the community of nations need. He cites a verse from the *Gītā* to show that the policy of peaceful co-existence has the sanction of scripture-[29] Many Indians proudly claim that India has introduced great ideals of conduct and moral principles in the field of

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[27]J.G. Arapura, "Some Afterthoughts on Buddha Jayanti," *Panchshila*, Vol. 1. No. 1, (Aug. 1956), p. 31.

[28]S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion in a Changing World*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1967, p. 157.

[29]Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

international relations.[30] It is interesting to note, as an example, the statement of an eminent Indian diplomat, G.L. Mehta, who was India's ambassador to the United States. He says:

> Without having military strength or economic power, India has attained an important international status. India has also brought into international affairs the Gandhian concept of mediation and reconciliation which is embodied in the principles of *Panchashila* . . . India's policy of non-alignment or non-involvement is, therefore, not by any means negative or sterile.[31]

Panchshila was considered to be the embodiment of the cardinal principles of India's foreign policy in the fifties. The term was borrowed from the Buddhist ethics which laid down five principles of conduct. The ethics of the *Gītā* in a sense assimilated and widened the Buddhist principles. The *Gītā* concept of *dharma* covers individual as well as social goals. At the same time it incorporates some essential elements of the Buddhist *dharma* such as *ahiṁsā*. As we discussed above, this was the central teaching of the *Gītā* as understood by Gandhi. In the formulation of a policy of peaceful co-existence, the *Gītā* ideology of *dharma* plays a pivotal role, though the pragmatic policy makers do not very often speak of this for reasons of expediency. It may be said that this principle of conduct in international relations is largely built on the rational basis of mutual self-interest. However the success of this policy depends on the innate goodness of man and his ability to respond to goodness. "Thus the Panchashila idea of goodness derives from the faith in the *good sense*

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ye yathā mām prapadyante tāṁs tathai 'va bhajāmy aham
mama vartamā 'nuvartante manuṣyāh pārtha sarvaśah
(Bhagavadgītā, IV, 11).

[30]Sometimes these claims go too far. J.G. Arapura observes, "We are absolutely prolific in our idealistic utterances, so much so that almost every one of us sometimes unconsciously assumes the role of an apostle of Truth and Non-violence." (J.G. Arapura, "Some Afterthoughts on Buddha Jayanti" *Panchshila*, p. 30).

[31]G.L. Mehta, *Understanding India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961, p. 74.

of all people and from the trust that peoples and nations will observe the sanctity of contract and mutual agreement."[32] This is an extension of the Gandhian technique of *satyāgraha* and *ahiṁsā* from the domestic front to international relations. In Gandhi's hands *ahiṁsā* became the "power of the powerless" and sacrificial goodness was the abiding fulcrum in the lever of negotiations between the opposing parties.

The national ideology, which expressed in the policy of *Panchashila* and non-alignment, soon became a dogma for many Indians. One had to concede that dogmatic rigidity is in the nature of any ideology. But, this rigidity of approach led to a failure to recognise the full realities of the diplomatic chess game and the power struggles. Along with this dogmatism, the idealism which was rationalized still remained entangled in idealistic illusions. As Arapura puts it, ". . . it would be a worse and more unpractical species of idealistic illusion to assume that we must or *can* give up idealism. . . . The trouble is that idealism can never rationally comprehend either the full-dimensional scope or the irrational implications of the very rationality that it may have evolved in relation to the socio-political situation of a given epoch."[33] This excessive idealistic element convinced the Indian policy makers that history has ordained them as peacemakers. As a result of all this, the moral and spiritual strength of the Gandhian concept of *ahiṁsā* and reconciliation was drained off from the principles of *Panchashila*. Finally, the confrontation with India's big neighbour China, in the icy wastes of the Himalayas, drove home to the national leaders the naivete and powerlessness of their ideology.

Sarvodaya—A Counter Ideology

Gandhi used the term *sarvodaya* for the first time in his Gujarati translation of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. Later it has become a synonym for Gandhian ideology. This Sanskrit term is a compound of *sarva* and *udaya*, meaning

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[32]J.G. Arapura, "Presuppositions of India's Foreign Policy," *Religion and Society*, Vol. VI, No. 4 (Dec. 1959), p. 12.

[33]J.G. Arapura, "Some Afterthoughts on Buddha Jayanti," *Panchshila*, p. 31.

respectively all and uplift. So, literally *sarvodaya* means "upliftment of all." As S.K. Ramachandra Rao correctly points out, for Gandhi *sarvodaya* meant the universal welfare of the entire humanity. "It refers not primarily to material objects but to the total personality of the individual and to the cultural contents of a nation."[34] Gandhi in his first book, *Hind Swaraj*, advocated that real rights "are a result of performance of duty"[35] and real happiness is "that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty."[36] This book is said to be the quintessence of Gandhi's ideas, outlines some of his fundamentals—soul-force, individual reform, self-sacrifice, re-construction of India on the lines of ancient Indian village. The sarvodaya ideology incorporates all these on the basis "of the value system of the Indian society and culture which Indians consider as eternal (*Sanātan Dharma*)."[37]

During the days of the national struggle, Gandhi visualised the reconstruction of the Indian society on "the foundations of the old spiritual and moral values of India."[38] In his mind, this was the only way to meet the challenges of the contemporary ideologies like communism and capitalism. For the realization of this ideal, Gandhi believed that the power of the state should be devolved to the villages. He called this *grāma svarāj*, self-rule of the village. He was very suspicious of the power of the state and other centralised political organizations. "The state represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul but the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned away

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[34]S.K. Ramachandra Rao, *The Idea of Sarvodaya*, Bangalore 1951, p. 39.

[35]M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Navajeevan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 72.

[36]*Ibid.*, p. 61.

[37]K.C. Panchanadikar, "Religion, Social Forces and Historical Periods in India—An Analysis of Social & Cultural Dynamics" in *Towards a Sociology of Culture in India*, ed, by T.K.N. Unnithan, Prentice Hall, New Delhi, 1965, p. 160.

[38]Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya*. L.N. Agarwal, Agra, 1965, p. 356.

from violence to which it owes its very existence."[39] He saw industrialisation as a threat to human values and as a road that would eventually lead man to slavery. In his *ashrams*, volunteers were trained to propagate the values of manual labour and cottage industries. "The underlying principle is," as S.K. Ramachandra Rao observes, "that not only material goods must be produced but the growth and development of the worker's personality must be assured."[40] The development of human personality, as Gandhi conceived, consists in appreciating values such as non-violence, honesty, simplicity, service of the people and the sanctity of labour. As he demonstrated in his own life, the first step towards a sarvodaya society is to find happiness in a simple and frugal life.

The final goal in the Gandhian scheme of social evolution is the attainment of *Rāma Rājya* or the Kingdom of righteous rule.[41] Only in such a society, Gandhi believed, that every one can realize the ultimate end of life. This, to Gandhi, is the realization of God as all-pervasive truth. All of Gandhi's political, economic and social endeavours were oriented towards this goal. They were steps to guide the society through progressive enlargement of moral consciousness in and through the service of the downtrodden, whom he called *daridra nārayana* (God, the poor). In the evolution of this Gandhian ideology, we can clearly trace the influence of the *Gītā*. We may say that the theoretical roots of *sarvodaya* are in the Vedanta philosophy of the *Gītā* though Gandhi derived some aspects of his economic ideas from Ruskin and Tolstoy. Many Indian writers ascribe Gandhi's rejection of the principle "the greatest good of the greatest number" to his Vedantic moorings. In their analysis, *sarvodaya* aims to serve the good of all and "not only the numerical majority because

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[39]Quoted by Jayaprakash Narayan, "Gandhi and the Politics of Decentralization" in *Gandhi, India and the World, An International Symposium*, p. 240.

[40]S.K. Ramachandra Rao, *op. cit* , p. 45.

[41]Rama, the hero of the epic *Ramayana* was an ideal king and his subjects knew no want, spiritual or material. Gandhi evoked the golden age of Rama as the ideal to be pursued by India.

all beings are reflections or manifestations of one Supreme Reality."[42]

It may be assumed that Gandhi planned to translate his *sarvodaya* ideology into the social and economic life of India after Independence. With this view, he issued a call to transform the Indian National Congress, the political party which led the freedom struggle into a non-political organization to serve the people. He was opposed to Congressmen seeking political power. But the political situation following independence was chaotic and Gandhi himself became a victim of the violence he tried to overcome. The orthodox Gandhians kept the torch of Gandhi's idealism burning and they published "the Sarvodaya Plan" on January 30, 1950, the second anniversary of Gandhi's assassination. Jayaprakash Narayan recalls how this plan came into being:

> When Gandhi was still alive, it had been decided . . . that the constructive workers should meet at Wardha (Gandhi's ashram) towards the end of February 1948 and prepare a programme embodying the Gandhian principles of national reconstruction to be placed before the country and the Government. Mahatmaji himself was to guide this meeting, but history willed otherwise.[43]

The Gandhians, according to "the Sarvodaya Plan" engaged in the service of the people through the same constructive programme which Gandhi had evolved during his lifetime. However, *sarvodaya* acquired the character of a movement only when Vinoba Bhave started the *Bhoodan* movement as a counter-point to the communist activities in Telengana.[44] Under Vinoba Bhave's leadership *sarvodaya* has become a living ideology which has given new dimensions to Gandhism.

The situation in Telengana acquired the characteristics of

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[42]Viswanath Prasad Varma, p. 363. Cf. Vasant Nargolkar, *The Creed of Saint Vinoba*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1963, p. 57.

[43]Jayaprakash Narayan, *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy*, Asia Publishing House, London, 1964, p. 91-92.

[44]Ganesh Prasad, "Sarvodaya—A Critical Study," *Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, p. 39.

a class struggle when the tenants, under communist leadership seized land from the landlords. Violent clashes took place between the peasants who tried to retain the land, and the police who were employed in suppressing the revolt. Vinoba Bhave was concerned with the sufferings of the people and introduced the *Bhoodan* (land gift) movement as a peaceful solution to the land problem. This was the first introduction of the Gandhian ideology of social transformation through peaceful means on a national scale. Rejecting the method of revolutionary seizure of land adopted by the peasants under communist leadership, he also rejected the method of bringing about agrarian reforms through legislative measures adopted by the Congress government; in place of both these methods, he advocated the voluntary parting of the land by those who owned it.[45] In Bhave's thinking both of these methods, each in its own way involved violence in the solution of social problems. The first was mass action and thus involved direct violence. On the other hand, the second involved the use of the state machinery which, after all, is the use of organized force by the majority against the minority. Bhave entered the troubled area of Telengana with the plea that all land belongs to God and those who hold it in trusteeship must part with one-sixth of their land to be distributed among all landless.

The relevance of the Bhoodan movement is not so much in its application as an alternative solution to the socio-economic problems, but is in its attempts to build a spiritual and moral basis to the social life. The real aim of this movement, in the words of J.G. Arapura, "is to put humanity through a spiritual discipline calculated to *humanize* it and to cure the basic ills that mar the spiritual image of man in the context of social existence."[46] Bhave is very emphatic about this and he presents his programme as a sacrificial sharing of one's wealth with the needy. This sharing of land, he believes, is the first step towards a spiritual

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[45]Cf. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *The Mahatma and the Ism*. People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1959, p. 124.

[46]J.G. Arapura, "Sociological Alienation and Gandhian Philosophy" *Panchshila*, Vol. I, No. 4 (1956) p. 24.

society. Bhoodan movement to Bhave is *Bhoodānayajña*. He does not take *dān* as gift, though literally it means gift. Following Śankara's interpretation of *dānaṁ* as equal division or sharing (*dānaṁ saṁvibhagaḥ*) Bhave says that when he accepts land on behalf of the poor, he is not accepting it as charity from the rich.[47] On the other hand, he is offering an alternative to the rich to save themselves from a violent revolution. The *yajña* aspect of his movement speaks of its religious characteristics. In this sacrificial rite of offering a portion of one's land, one is acquiring merit as in Vedic sacrifices. According to Bhave, it is also an act of expiation for the sins committed. It is by sinful covetousness that society developed the system of private ownership of land and the means to mitigate the weight of this sin is to share it, in the sacrifice, with the poor.[48]

The Gita Ethic as Basis of Social Life

Vinoba Bhave applied the teachings of the *Gītā* in a direct way to solve the socio-economic problems of India more than any other national leader. His *Bhoodan* movement, as K.C. Panchanadikar puts it, is "a social movement to reconstruct Indian society on a revolutionary re-interpretation of *Gītā* ethic."[49] Panchanadikar goes on to add that *sarvodaya* aims to institute all that the *Gītā* had merely stated as social ethic. He says, "After a lapse of centuries the traditional Indian ethic enunciated in the *Gītā* is sought to be instituted in social living."[50] Bhave acknowledges that his movement which he characterizes as "the new ideology of collective *ahiṁsā*" is a result of the fusion of science of the West and the ethics of India.[51] But Bhave is explicit in stating that his movement is a contextual expression of the Vedanta ideology. While accepting Śankara's basic assumptions, he makes a very important addition to Śankara's posi-

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[47]Cf. Vasant Nargolkar, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
[48]Cf. S.K. Ramachandra Rao, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
[49]K.C. Panchanadikar, *op. cit.*, p. 157.
[50]*Ibid.*, p. 162.
[51]Quoted by Ganesh Prasad, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

tion on the status of the world. In his preface to *Gurubodha*, selections from Śankara, he presents his views about God, man and the world in the form of a couplet. It may be translated as follows: "Vinu has extracted this essence of the Vedas, the Vedanta and the *Bhagavadgītā* that Brahman is truly existent, the world is a vibrant manifestation and that life consists in the pursuit of Truth."[52] This is an obvious imitation of the famous statement of Sankara: "Brahman alone is truly existent, the world is an illusion and the *jīvātman* is none other than Brahman himself."[53] Justifying this position, Bhave adds: "I do not think I have made any great departure from the general teaching of the Vedanta philosophy. On the contrary, my statement brings about a happy reconciliation between Vedanta and the age of science."[54] By ascribing a relative reality to the world as apposed to total unreality, Bhave is building a metaphysical basis for his ideology of serving the poor.

Bhave's *Talks on the Gītā*, though delivered as early as 1932, long before he launched *Bhoodanayajña*, contains the idea of service. He says:

> All the Vedas are in your palm and they say 'serve.' Consider whether your hands worked yesterday, whether they are fit to work again today, and whether they carry the marks of service. When the hands are worn out with service, then the destiny that Brahma ordained for you becomes clear. . . . We have to build our lives on the foundations of service, love and knowledge.[55]

This is a new aspect of the *Gītā* which Bhave has brought out. In his various lectures and writings he further related the teachings of the *Gītā* to his movement. He says that the final goal which the *Gītā* places before humanity is salvation and *sarvodaya* attempts to bring this salvation on the socio-

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[52]*Vedavedāntagītanaṁ vinunā sāra udhṛtaḥ*
Brahma satyaṁ jagatsphurtirjivanaṁ satyaśodhanaṁ
(Quoted by Vasant Nargolkar, *op. cit.*, p. 62).

[53]*Brahma Satyaṁ, jaganmithyā, jīva brahmaiva nāparaḥ.*

[54]Quoted by Vasant Nargolkar, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

[55]Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gītā*, p. 247-248.

economic plane.[56] The *Gītā* prescribes three ways—*yajña* (sacrifice) *dāna* (equality) and *tapas* (austerity). *Bhoodāna-yajña* stresses all these aspects in its search for re-construction of rural India.

A new content to Indian spirituality is traced from the *Gītā* by Bhave. The attribute of God looking upon all creatures with an equal eye,[57] is fundamental to his ideology. He argues that to unite with God, which is the final aim of human life, is to become like God. "To become like Him amounts to being able to look upon all creatures with an equal eye or to meet all situations with equanimity."[58] While accepting the traditional *yogas* of the *Gītā*, Bhave finds another yoga, *sāmyayoga*, the yoga of equanimity, as the supreme *yoga* of the *Gītā*. He borrows the expression *paramasāmya* from *Mundakopaniṣad* and demonstrates that the *Gītā* has elaborated this upanisadic goal. In the upanisad *paramasāmya* stands for supreme identity, that is Brahman. In this age of social, economic and political equality, Bhave interprets *sāmya* as equality. *Sāmya* in everyday life, according to Bhave, is a preparation for reaching *paramasāmya*. In his collection of aphorisms entitled *Sāmyasūtras*, the first aphorism is "*abidheyaṁ paramasāmyaṁ*." This, to a great extent speaks of the content of his ideology. Addressing a group of *Bhoodan* workers he explains his meaning of the aphorism in the following words:

> *Parama Sāmya* is to be meditated upon and longed for as the goal of life. . . . I have named the *Gītā Sāmyayoga* which is both the art and the philosophy of equality, equanimity and identity. Other commentators have given other names. . . . It is possible that the present age or the nature of the work that I have undertaken might have been the influencing factor behind my decision to name the *Gīta* as *Sāmyayoga*. I have chosen that title also because the very secret of life is the practice of equality

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[56]Cf. Ganesh Prasad, *op. cit.* p. 45.

[57]Cf. *ihai 'va tair jitaḥ sargo yeṣāṁ sāmye sthiaṁ manah*
nirdoṣaṁ hi samaṁ brahma tasmād brahmani te sthitāḥ.
(Bhagavadgītā, V, 19.)

[58]Vasant Nargolkar, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

> and equanimity. . . . *Parama Sāmya* does not include the economic or the social equalities alone. They are, of course, desirable. But there is another kind of *sāmya* namely, equanimity or balance of mind, which is also implied in it. But this too is not adequate. The state that transcends all these *sāmyas* is the Supreme Identity, *Parama Sāmya*. . . . It takes its stand on the spiritual ground beyond the realms of science or even morality. And that is Brahman.[59]

In this statement we can see the Vedantic foundations of the *Bhoodan* movement in a nutshell. Time and again, Bhave claims that spiritual *gnosis* and compassion for human beings are the two cardinal principles of Hinduism. He has no doubt in his mind that his movement is an extension of the Vedantic metaphysics as interpreted by Śankara.[60]

As the *Bhoodan* movement made its mark throughout India, Bhave extended the ideology to other areas of life. It included the surrender of whole villages to common ownership, (*grāmdān*) gift of one's wealth, (*sampatti dān*) partial dedication of one's intellectual capacities, (*buddhi-dān*) voluntary labour for projects of public utility (*śrama-dān*) etc. The ultimate social aim of these programmes was to drive home to the Indian people the value of *aparigraha, non*-possession. According to Bhave, to possess material goods in surplus of one's basic needs is a sin against society. But to give up private possessions is not an easy task for any man. The *sarvodaya* leaders are aware of this, and they believe that a trans-valuation of the present values of the society is necessary for the success of the movement. To this extent, the success of any ideology depends on the change of attitudes on the part of the people. Jayaprakash Narayan who came to *sarvodaya* through a winding road which passed through Marxism, Socialism and Democratic Socialism, says, "This movement [*Bhoodan*] is based on the principle of change of heart. It is being conducted in the belief that man

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[59]Quoted by Vasant Nargolkar, *op. cit.*, p. 58-59.

[60]Cf. Vinoba Bhave, *Bhoodan Ganga*, Sarva seva-sangh, Kashi, 1957, Vol. II, p. 151-156.

is amenable to change. That is so, because all of us are essentially one, fragments of the same Almighty Father."[61] As we noted above, sarvodayans believe that social and economic problems cannot be solved through legislation, The reason being that (1) *sarvodaya* wants to bring about a moral revolution which cannot be effected by laws and (2) it accepts the Gandhian maxim that legislation without conversion is a dead-letter.[62]

The programmes of *sarvodaya* are presented as a counter-ideology to socialism and communism. While *sarvodaya* lays stress on the development of virtue by an individual as the real path to social progress, socialism turns to the state to control the means of production and distribution. *Sarvodaya* is against all kinds of centralised authority. So it speaks of *loknīti*, rule of the people, in place of *rājniti*, rule of the state. The village is the centre of power in the *sarvodaya* scheme. The consensus of the representation of the village in running their affairs is the real democracy. There is an element of anarchism in the *sarvodaya* ideology, in that it speaks of "village republics" without granting any place to nation-states. It is one thing to check the Leviathan state from becoming a super Leviathan. But it is against human nature itself, to speak of abolishing the power of the state at this stage of human evolution. Jayaprakash Narayan speaks the language of the Utopians when he says that to realise the sublime goals of freedom, equality, brotherhood and peace, socialism has to be transformed into *sarvodaya*.[63] Nevertheless, Narayan's warning that "to apotheosise material happiness and encourage an outlook on life that feeds on an insatiable hunger for material goods"[64] would eventually lead to the submersion of equality, freedom and brotherhood is too grave to be ignored by any serious-minded person. The emphasis on spiritual values and methods in solving socio-

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[61]Jayaprakash Narayan, *A Picture of the Sarvodaya Social Order*. Sarva Seva Sangh, Tanjore, 1955, p. 6.

[62]Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[63]Cf. Jayaprakash Narayan, *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy* Asia Publishing House, London, 1964, p. 152.

[64]*Ibid.*, p. 155.

economic problems makes *sarvodaya* a significant movement of our times, though admittedly its practical success is rather limited. Bhave remained very optimistic about the future of *sarvodaya*. He said that if there is going to be any real trial of strength between two ideologies for worldwide acceptance, "it will be between Communism and Sarvodaya and not as is commonly supposed, between Communism and Capitalism."[65]

Vedantic Socialism

Some modern interpreters of Vedanta philosophy are concerned to discern a strong basis for equality, fraternity and socialism in that system. These exponents of the Vedanta, who are usually referred to as Neo-Vedantins, believe that their interpretation is truly in line with the great texts of the Vedanta, *prasthānatraya*, and that of the *ācāryas* Vivekananda who is acclaimed as the prophet of New India, declares that only the Vedanta can furnish all the modern communistic or equalizing theories with a spiritual basis.[66] This is made possible, according to Vivekananda, by the superiority of the Vedanta in that it preaches "the divinity of man, and not his sinfulness as Christianity does."[67] Aurobindo Ghose expresses the same thought in the following words:

> The union of liberty and equality can only be achieved by the power of human brotherhood. But brotherhood exists in the soul and by the soul. . . . When the soul claims freedom, it is the freedom of its development, the self-development of the divine in man in all his being when it claims equality, what it is claiming is that freedom equally for all and the recognition of the sameness of all, the same godhead in all human beings.[68]

Rabindranath Tagore's famous formula, "the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal"[69] echoes the same

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[65]Vasant Nargolkar, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

[66]Cf. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Advaita Ashrama. Calcutta, 1959-1963, Vol. V. p. 212.

[67]*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 138, Cf. Vol. I, p. 426.

[68]Aurobindo Ghose, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 368.

[69]Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1961, p. 17.

Vedantic idea.

Gandhi, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Bhave and others affirm the Vedantic contributions towards the development of democracy and socialism. It is commonly assumed that dignity of man is one of the cornerstones of democracy. Gandhi finds the philosophic basis for this assumption in Advaita Vedanta. He says, "Advaita reveals the truth of the inherent equality of all men."[70] Aurobindo argues that the spirit of democracy which stands for the brotherhood of man, travelled from the East to the West in the form of Christianity, while admitting that ancient Indians failed to give expression to this spirit in their social life.[71] But Aurobindo is emphatic in affirming that "The dignity of human existence, given to it by the thought of the Vedantic and classical ages of Indian culture, exceeded anything conceived by the noblest idea of humanity."[72] The principle of "one man one vote" accepted by democracy, according to Bhave expresses the "Vedantic doctrine of the oneness of the human soul."[73] Radhakrishnan sees democracy as an expression of religion, nay, "it is the highest religion." He writes, "The human individual is the highest, the most concrete embodiment of the Spirit on earth and anything which hurts his individuality or damages his dignity is undemocratic and irreligious."[74] This conviction springs from faith in the one Supreme. It means ". . . that we, His offspring, are of one body, of one flesh—the Brahmin, the Harijan, the black, the yellow, and the white whose prayers go up to one God under different names."[75] Radhakrishnan

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[70]M.K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 360.

[71]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, *Selections from the Bandemātaraṁ*, p. 125-126.

[72]Aurobindo Ghose, "The Indian Conceptions of Life." *Silver Jubilee Commemoration Volume of the Indian Philosophical Congress* (1950), p. 173.

[73]Vinoba Bhave, *Bhoodan Ganga* (Hindi) Sarva Seva-Sangh, Kashi, 1957, Vol. IV, p. 261 (my translation).

[74]Quoted by Humayan Kabir, "Radhakrishnan's Political Philosophy," in *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, ed. by P.A. Schilpp, Tudor Publishing Co., New York, 1952, p. 690.

[75]*Ibid.*, p. 694.

lays stress on the Vedantic formulas such as *Ayamātmā Brahma* (this self is Brahman) *sohamasmi* (I am He) to drive home the Vedantic foundations of democracy. He holds that the utterance *sohamasmi* in the *Chadogya Upaniṣad* declares the universal brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God at the same time.[76] Radhakrishnan is aware of the difficulties in translating these ideals into everyday political life. Nevertheless, he is optimistic about the perfectability of man. "There must come a time when all individuals will become sons of God and be received into the glory of immortality."[77]

There are many Indian leaders who subscribe to the ideologies based on the Vedanta, believe that the acquisitive society can be transformed into a socialist society by spiritualising the creeds of Western socialism. This means a baptism of those schools of socialism that hold a materialistic view of life and strive for material prosperity at the expense of spiritual values. The "Vedantins aim at achieving the goal of socialism through limiting human wants and desires."[78] Swami Ram Tirth, who has been known as a Practical Vedantin, says "Domestic, social, political or religious salvation of every country lies in the Vedanta carried into effect."[79] This "applied Vedanta," according to Ram Tirth, ". . . implies in active practice my neighbour to be my own self, feeling myself as one or identical with all, losing my little self to become the self of all. This is crucifixion of the selfishness, and the resurrection of the All Self."[80] Ram Tirth agrees with the Marxists in the abolition of private property,

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[76]Paramahansa Yogananda interprets *sohamasmi* as the goal towards which humanity must be striving. He says "*Soham*: I have found the vast Cosmic Spirit reflected within me as the Soul, the little Myself, the little I." (Paramahansa Yogananda, "The Bhagavad Gītā—Spiritual Interpretation," in *Self-Realization*. Vol. XLV, No. 3 Summer 1974, p. 38).

[77]S. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1952, p. 245.

[78]S.L. Malhotra, *Social and Political Orientations of Neo-Vedantism*, S. Chand, Delhi, 1970, p. 144.

[79]Ram Tirth, *In the Woods of God-Realization*, Ram Tirth Prakashan, Varanasi, 1957, Vol. III, p. 259.

[80]Ram Tirth, *Gospel of Work*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1963, p. 39.

for he holds that possession of property is the most sacrilegious deed against one's *Ātman*.[81] Here he goes one step further than Gandhi and Bhave. The *sarvodaya* demand for common ownership is based on the idea that "all wealth, even though we may acquire it with our individual effort and skill, is not for us alone, but has been granted to us by God for all of us."[82] Bhagvan Das, though a Theosophist, falls in line with the Neo-Vedantins and asserts, "True socialism can be founded only upon the sense of the Oneness of all life, which means the realization of Supreme Self."[83] In these assertions we may trace a trend towards employing the Vedanta to counter any ideology or even scientific discoveries. Vivekananda stretches the Vedanta to its limits when he comments that the electro-magnetic theory was advancing science in the direction of the Vedanta.

The exponents of the Vedantic ideology of equality lean heavily on certain verses of the *Gītā*. One reason for this, it can be safely assumed, is the popularity of the *Gītā* as a religious text. The *Gītā* in fact carries on the incipient monistic formulations of the Upaniṣads. But it is debatable whether the *Gītā* actually advocates equality as we understand the concept today. The verse often cited to support the view, reads as follows: "Sages see with an equal eye *(samadarśinaḥ)* a learned and humble Brahmin, a cow, an elephant or even a dog or an outcaste."[84] Commenting on this verse, Radhakrishnan observes, "This view makes us look upon our fellow beings with kindliness and compassion. The wise see the one God in all beings and develop the quality of equal-mindedness which is characteristic of the Divine."[85] There

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[81]Cf. Ram Tirth, *In the Woods of God-Realizatian*, Vol. III, p. 94.

[82]Vinoba Bhave, *Bhoodan, Yajña*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, p. 64.

[83]Bhagavan Das, *The Essential Unity of All Religions*, Kashi Vidya Pitha, Banaras, 1939, p. 589.

[84]*Vidyāvinaya saṁpanne brāhmane gavi hastini*
śuni cai 'va śvapāke ca panditāh samadarśinaḥ.
(Bhagavadgītā, V, 18.

[85]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, Allen & Unwin, London 1970, p. 182. Cf. M.K. Gandhi, *The Teaching of the Gītā*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1971, p. 81-82.

are a few statements in the *Gītā* which can be interpreted as supporting this concept of equality of all men, e.g., Kṛṣṇa describes himself as "the friend of all beings" *(suhṛdaṁ sarvabhūtānāṁ)*,[86] "abiding in all beings" *(sarvabhūtasthitam)*,[87] "The same in (alike to) all beings" *(samo 'haṁ sarvabhuteṣu)*.[88] "the seed of all existence" *(sarvabhūtānaṁ bijaṁ)*.[89] In IX. 32, final salvation is offered to all those who take refuge in Kṛṣṇa, irrespective of caste distinctions.[90] However, it is rather difficult to reconcile the overall position of the *Gītā* on *dharma* as *Kuladharma* (caste duty) and the insistence on the protection of *varṇa* system, with these not too clear statements on equality. V.P. Varma makes a very pertinent observation on the Vedantic claim of equality. He says:

> I think that the Vedanta does not teach the gospel of equality relevant in a political and social context, but advocates the concept of equality only to the extent that it teaches either identity with, or merging into, the absolute, as the transcendental destiny of all human beings regardless of all mundane differences.[91]

As an extension of the ideology of equality of all men, Neo-Vedantins apply this concept to religions as well. Beginning from Ramkrishna Paramahamsa, the Neo-Vedantins propound the creed that all religions are the same, meaning thereby not only the *samaya* and *margas* within Hinduism, but also other credal systems outside Hinduism. Vivekananda developed a philosophical basis for this affirmation of the validity of all religions and popularised it even in the West. The new exponents of the Vedanta, therefore proclaim that all religions lead to the same end. Gandhi, Bhave, Radhakrishnan

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[86]*Bhagavadgītā*, V. 29.
[87]*Ibid.*, VI. 31.
[88]*Ibid.*, IX, 29, Cf. XVIII. 54.
[89]*Ibid.*, X. 39.
[90]*Māṁ hi pārtha vyāpāśritya ye 'pi syuh pāpayonayaḥ*
striyo vaiśyās thathā śūdrās te'pi yānti parāṁ gatim.
(Bhagavadgītā, IX. 32.)
[91]Viswanath Prasad Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 228.

and others take this line in their approach to religions. Commenting on *Bhagavadgītā* IX 23,[92] Radhakrishnan says, "The author of the *Gītā* welcomes light from every quarter of the heaven. It has a right to shine because it is light."[93] Radhakrishnan carries this thought further in many of his works."[94] In his commentary on *Brahma Sūtra* I. i.4, *tat tu samanvayat*, he says, "Today the *samanvayat* or harmonisation has to be extended to the living faiths of mankind. Religion concerns man as man and not man as Jew or Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, Sikh or Muslim."[95] We have to point out here that the view of these Vedantins is not in harmony with the orthodox Hindu traditions. The views of Śankara, Jaimini, Kumarila, Ramānuja and other *ācāryas* clearly indicate that the Vedic faith is exclusive. It is a "once for all" revelation for them. In his *bhāṣya* of *Brahma Sūtra* II.i.3. Śankara says: "The final beatitude is not attained by the mere knowledge of *Sāṁkhya smṛti* or the path of *yoga*, without reference to the Veda. The scriptures obviate the possiblity of any other means of attaining the final beatitude except through the knowledge of the self referred in the Vedas."[96] He holds firmly to the position,

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[92]*ye 'py anyadevatābhakta yajante śradhayā 'nvitāh*
te 'pi maṁ eva kaunteya yajanty avidhipūrvakaṁ.

[93]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 248.

[94]Radhakrishnan strongly believes that Hinduism has been tolerant and non-dogmatic in its approach to other religions. He even claims that Śankara held this position. He notes that Śankara "did not believe in a God who denied the existence of his rivals," and adds that "this non-dogmatic attitude has persisted in Hindu religious history." (*Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, Humphrey Milford, London, 1939, p. 311). This generous attitude of Hinduism, in his view, "is bound up with its religion and its policy." (*Ibid.*, p. 316). Radhakrishnan continues, "The *Bhagavadgītā*, with a clear grasp of the historical, warns us against taking away the psychological comfort of people by unsettling their faiths. We are required to confirm the faith of others even though we may not have any share in it." (*Ibid.*, p. 328).

[95]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sūtra, the Philosophy of Spiritual Life*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1960, p. 249.

[96]Śankaracarya, *Brahmasūtra Śankarabhasya*. Tr, by V.M. Apte, Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1960, p. 282.

"No one who does not know the Vedas, knows the Great One."[97]

Interaction of Ideologies

The twentieth century Indian mind has been a battleground of ideologies, scene of a battle primarily between western ideologies and Indian world-views. In this, Hinduism has demonstrated its ability to absorb alien ideologies and then develop new ideologies and even counter-ideologies evolved from the cultural and spiritual heritage of India. As we discussed above, the search in India's heritage for the foundations of nationalism, socialism, democracy and so on testifies to this tendency. *Bhoodan* movement which aims at "the establishment in India of a non-violent, non-exploitive social order"[98] has been acclaimed as the "real communism." The ideology of a secular state, which the Indian nation has accepted, is another instance that speaks of India's power to assimilate non-Indian ideologies. Whil: K.M. Panikkar categorically declares that the roots of the secular state have to be sought in the West,[99] Radhakrishnan takes an opposite view. For him, secularism is nothing but the expression of Hindu tolerance and affirmation of the unity of all religions. With him, this is as much a dogma as the assertion that one religion is superior to all others. He writes, "Secularism here does not mean irreligion or atheism or even stress on material comforts. It proclaims that it lays stress on the universality of spiritual values which may be attained by a variety of ways."[100] In a report by the University Education Commission of which he was the chairman, this concept comes out. The report states:

> The absolute religious neutrality of the state can be preserved in state institutions, if what is good and great in

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[97]*Tait. Bra.* III. 12. 9.7.

[38]Vasant Nargolkar, *op. cit.*, 247.

[99]Cf. K.M. Panikkar, *The State and the Citizen*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1956, p. 28.

[100]S. Radhakrishnan, "Foreword" in S. Abid Hussain, *The National Culture of India*, Jaico Publishing House, Bombay, 1956, p. 8.

every religion is presented, and what is more essential, the unity of all religion.[101]

This, we may note, is advocacy of one view of religion and may come into conflict with the principles of the secular state. Nevertheless, the attempt to integrate an ideology like secularism with India's spiritual heritage has an advantage. It helps to create an intellectual greenhouse, so to say, where this transplanted ideology can thrive.

In the long history of Hinduism, this process of adoption and assimilation is nothing new. Philosophic systems such as *Sāṁkhya*, which denies the existence of God *Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika*, which propounds atomist rationalism, were accommodated along with other orthodox systems. Of course, attempts have been made to re-interpret these systems in line with the main current of Indian thought. K. Damodaran observes that the shortcomings of these systems "were cleverly exploited later by idealist thinkers."[102] In Damodaran's view, idealist thinkers of the feudalist era distorted and misinterpreted the original rational and materialistic outlook of these schools.[103] In the context of this adoption, assimilation and re-interpretation (misinterpretation as Damodaran and other Marxists would have it) we have to raise the question whether there has been any genuine interaction between ideologies at all. Do the ideologies of Gandhi, Bhave, Radhakrishnan *et. al.*, bear the marks of a genuine interaction? Or, is it only another phase in the all-embracing nature of Hinduism? The answer is, yes and no at the same time. In the writings of these leaders of thought we can discern an earnest attempt to come to grips with modern ideological issues, without sacrificing what they consider to be vital in the Indian heritage. On the other hand, in their eagerness to assert the supremacy of Vedantic idealism, they got themselves entangled in certain dogmas of their own creation and this tinted their windows of vision.

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[101] *Report of the University Education Commission*, Government of India Press, Simla, 1950, p. 302.

[102] K. Damodaran, *Indian Thought, A Critical Survey*, p. 165.

[103] Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

The intellectual leaders of conservative persuasion attempted to fortify the nation from the influence of "western materialistic ideologies" by bringing out the external message of the *Gītā* and other texts. The following exhortation by Kurtakoti, alias Śankaracarya represents this position.

> The [*samatva*, equality] is the refrain of the *Gītā* and it is the message that has a direct bearing on the present conflict and unrest and tension. . . . Therefore, the ideal life taught to him [Arjuna] may be looked upon, as the ideal existence and the way of living prescribed to him may be regarded as the Path of Progress destined for all.[104]

Puthezhath Rama Menon goes one step further and calls for the rejection of the western concepts such as democracy and political freedom. In his view, these concepts are mere frauds. He writes:

> Is there anything in democracy that is able to touch and save the masses? What is called political freedom is merely the pride and delusion of the elite. The so called democracy is only the rule of the few 'little smarties'. It was Lord Krṣṇa who preached real 'communism'; communism that is based on mutual love and trust and on faith in God, not on violence, injustice, selfishness and jealousy. The communion of the *Gītā* that teaches respect and compassion and faith in the universality of the soul, is the alternative to Marxism and Capitalism.[105]

To our disappointment, neither Kurtakoti nor Rama Menon give us any specific reference to the *Gītā* on which they base their assertions. This kind of interpretation of the *Gītā*, we may note, comes from an intellectual quest that is satisfied only with total solutions to any problem.

Those Indian intellectuals who accept Marxist interpretations of history take the opposite pole. Some of them write off the *Gītā* as an attempt of the priestly-feudal class to per-

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[104]Kurtakoti, "Towards a New World Order—The Gītā," in *Studies in the Gītā*. p. 40-41.

[105]Puthezhath Rama Menon, *Gītāprāntangalil (in Malayalam)* Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, Trichur, 1967, p. 139 (my translation).

petuate caste-system and slavery.[106] M.N. Roy, the great Indian revolutionary and ideologist, contends that the philosophy of the *Gītā*, that is Vedanta, is not philosophy proper as such, but theology. To Roy, only those systems that "tried to explain the origin, evolution and phenomena of nature independent of an assumed supernatural agency"[107] fit into the definition of philosophy. *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika* and *Sāṁkhya* fall under the definition of philosophy as love of knowledge. They do not enter into speculation about the unknowable, relying on the authority of scriptures. Roy observes, ". . . criticism must doubt the philosophical validity of a system which draws authority from scriptures."[108] From fragmentary evidence Roy reconstructs the forgotten chapter of Indian philosophy and concludes, "As everywhere else, so in India also, philosophy was originally materialistic."[109]

The genuine nature of this philosophic quest was lost, because it was done mostly by the Brahmins, who earned their living by performing the rituals and ceremonies of natural religion. "Therefore, the evolution of thought in ancient India was a headlong plunge into theological speculation."[110] Roy takes Radhakrishnan to task for presenting the post-Buddhist Vedanta system as the Hindu view of life."[111] In Roy's view the spiritual evolution of India was choked by Śankara who was "the ideologist of Brahmanical reaction and patriarchal society which were re-established on the ruins of the Buddhist revolution."[112] Therefore, Roy implies that the *Gītā* and its Vedantic interpretations do harm to the development of genuine philosophy. Roy obviously accepts the Pythagorian definition of philosophy as "contemplation, study and knowledge of nature."

It is interesting to recall that Roy was a prominent com-

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[106]Cf. Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 344.

[107]M.N. Roy, "Radhakrishnan in the Perspective of Indian Philosophy" in *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, p. 551.

[108]*Ibid.*, p. 548,

[109]*Ibid*,, p. 555.

[110]*Ibid.*, p. 549.

[111]*Ibid.*, *p.* 548.

[112]*Ibid.*, p. 556-557.

munist leader in the Soviet Union. While he was working in Bokhara, Central Asia, he studied Islamic scriptures to further the cause of revolution. He recollects, "With this purpose, [to win the poorer Muslim priests] I made a careful study of the Koran and other classics of Islamic theology. In public meetings I could justify the Revolution on scriptural authority."[113] It is not clear whether he has made such a study of the *Gītā* for the sake of revolution. When he returned to India in 1930, after he fell out of favour with Moscow, he was arrested and five hard years in jail witnessed a substantial change in his ideology. This change in Roy's concept of revolution is evident in his preference for the term "Indian renaissance," which means for him a "philosophical" and "spiritual" as well as economic revolution. Roy's quest for an ideology finally led him to a synthesis of materialism and liberal humanism, which he calls "Radical Humanism." For Roy, true spiritual freedom is freedom from the tyranny of religion. He writes: "The desire for freedom in social and political life, being an expression of the basic human urge for spiritual freedom, can be satisfied only by . . . a world-view which does away with the necessity of assuming a supernatural power or metaphysical sanction."[114] Jayaprakash Narayan, whose ideological pilgrimage was almost parallel to that of Roy's ended in a different ideology, sarvodaya, an ideology that springs from the Vedanta which Roy rejects. Narayan acknowledges Roy's influence on the evolution of his own thought.[115] But, Gandhi's influence prevailed and he accepted the Vedantic way. He writes, "The root of morality lies in the endeavour of man to realise this unity of existence, or to put it differently, to realise his self."[116]

Ponjikara Rafi, the author of *Kaliyugam*[117] takes an

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[113]M.N. Roy, *Memoirs*, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1964, p. 447.

[114]M,N. Roy, *Reason, Romanticism, and Revolution*, Renaissance Publishers, Calcutta, 1955, Vol. 2, p. 298.

[115]Cf. Jayaprakash Narayan, *Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy*, p. 240.

[116]*Ibid.*, p. 154.

[117]Ponjikara Rafi, *Kaliyugam* (in Malayalam) National Book Stall, Kottyam, 1971 (my translation).

entirely different approach to the *Gītā*. This book is acclaimed by critics as an outstanding contribution to the study of philosophy in Malayalam. The author says that his concern is to seek what solutions, if any, can be found in the teachings of ancient *ācāryas* to the problems that confront the modern world. In his words:

> From the horizontal facts we move to the vertical truth in search of an answer to these vital questions: 'Where do we come from?' and 'Where do we go from here?' That will lead us to a vertico-horizontal correlation which harmonizes time and space, cause and effect. The method used, to bring out the hidden truths of historical events, is the *yogaśāstra* of the age, that is Hegel's dialectics.[118]

The third question raised is, "What are we to do next?" The answer, as Rafi understands it, lies in the correlation and integration of the three manifestos given to humanity by the great *ācārayas*. These manifestoes are, The Ten Commandments, *The Bhagavadgītā* and the "*Communist Manifesto*."

In a world where faith in the Supernatural was taken for granted, it was natural for Moses and Vyasa to present their manifestoes as God-given. But, Rafi contends, in the twentieth century, "God is dead" and the style of life has been transformed according to this conviction. Therefore, man has to find answers to his questions without any help from God. In other words, man is the hero of the new manifesto. He is his own law-giver and charioteer. The central point in the *Gītā*, according to Rafi, is Kṛṣṇa's challenge to Arjuna to take up the sword to protect the *dharma*. This is expressed in about ten verses. All other *yogas* are secondary and they are given to prepare Arjuna to face this great task. *Dharma* is interpreted as the right of Arjuna and his comrades, the right to govern the kingdom. The battle of Kurukṣetra is really the battle between the exploiters and the exploited. Arjuna is the representative of the latter. The author of the *Gītā* presents Kṛṣṇa as the *avatāra* because it gives moral strength to Arjuna to lead the struggle of his

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[118]Ponjikara Rafi, "About Kaliyugam" (in Malayalam) *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. LI, No. I8, (July 15, 1973) p. 48 (translation mine).

people. In the stories of *Mahābhārata,* Rafi sees a prophetic warning about the class war of which Marx wrote several centuries later.[119] After a lengthy discussion of the similarities in outlook between the *Gītā* and the Communist Manifesto, Rafi concludes, "To put it differently, Marx was forced to unsheath that sword which was kept sheathed by the author of *Mahābhārata* and handed it over to the working class."[120] Marx's advocacy of class war for the establishment of a classless society, is in the same tradition of Kṛṣṇa who urged Arjuna to stand up for his rights and fight.[121] We cannot enter into a critique of Rafi's thesis, but suffice is to say that he selects those aspects of the *Gītā* which fit into his scheme of interpretation.

The ideological struggle in India, as we have seen above, is basically a struggle to accommodate and integrate modern western ideologies with the Indian ideologies. This means a radical re-orientation as to the goal of ideology: from salvation through knowledge, *gnosis*, to salvation through a concept of equality, *samatva*, from the salvation of the individual self to the salvation of the community. It is a different question, whether these new attempts to tilt the emphasis from the transcendant goal of personal salvation to the transient goal of social salvation, socialism as some idealogues would have it, would result in a revolution of the world. A revolution is difficult to foresee, for the major burden of the ideologists is to re-interpret the past so that it may meet the challenges of the present. Thus, the ideology in India, as in many other developing nations, resembles "that of Ataturk more than that of Marx—an ideology of development . . . based in national culture and tradition and related to local conditions."[122]

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[119]Cf. Ponjikara Rafi, *Kaliugam,* p. 436-452.

[120]*Ibid.*, p. 497.

[121]Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 498.

[122]Paul E. Sigmund, Jr. "Introduction" to *The Ideologies of The Developing Nations,* ed. by him, Praegar, New York, 1963, p. 39-40.

CHAPTER VII

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages we have discussed how the *Gītā* has been interpreted by the leaders of Indian thought to make the message of this ancient religious text relevant to the needs to Twentieth Century India. At the risk of generalization, we may say that in the various commentaries of the *Gītā* one can see Hindu India's response to the challenges of modernity. This response has been primarily one of turning back to the conserving power of orthodoxy: orthodoxy as represented by the synthesizing and assimilating ideology of the *Gītā*. The power of tradition to preserve the essence of spirituality—*dharma* as *Gītā* would have it—is one of the central themes of the *Gītā*. The divine interference for the preservation of *dharma*[1] assumes deterioration of the social institutions and the moral fibre that holds the society together. Thus the *Gītā* foresees the need for revolutionary changes to restore the harmony of life. K.M. Panikkar is right when he says that the *Gītā* ". . . does not give support to the doctrine that what exists is always the best and that change in itself is something to be resisted".[2] The historical context in which the *Gītā* came to be written also points to the pre-occupation of the author with preserving and protecting the right view of *dharma*. The "Philosophical compromise" reached in the *Gītā* can be understood, according to Belvalkar, ". . . as an effort on a great scale put forth by the older *Śrauta* religion with its institutions of *Yajña* and *Varṇāśrama* to hold its own and to stem the gathering tide of heretic and agnostic speculations".[3] The compromise of the *Gītā*, as Belvalkar points out, is a readiness to reform from

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[1]*Bhagavadgītā* IV. 8. See our discussion of *dharma* in Ch. II. (pp. 21-30).

[2]K.M. Panikkar, *Hinduism and the West*, p. 43.

[3]S.K. Belvalkar, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p, lxxxv,

within. The modern commentators of the *Gītā*, more or less stand in the tradition of its author, in their attempt to re-interpret its message and launch reformist movements on the basis of that message.

Challenge of Modernity

Robert N. Bellah lists four types of religious response to modernity and modernization. They are, conversion to Christianity, traditionalism, reformism and neo-traditionalism.[4] All these are mutually exclusive alternatives, although they may shade into one another. India's response, as we have seen in the commentaries of the *Gītā* is basically reformism. Bellah defines reformism as "a movement that re-interprets a particular religious tradition to show not only that it is compatible with modernization but also that, when truly understood, the tradition vigorously demands at least important aspects of modernity."[5] The commentaries of Tilak, Gandhi, Aurobindo, *et al*, fit very well into this definition of reformism. The typology we see in the works of these authors is one of re-interpretation of the Hindu traditions as represented by the *Gītā*. Panikkar attests this when he says, "Hindu Reformation . . . was indeed a significant fact, but it would have remained basically a religious movement but for the rediscovery of the *Bhagavad Gītā* as the political and social gospel of Hindu India".[6] Historically, Indian reformism dates from Rammohan Roy in the early nineteenth century. But the culmination of that movement, touching all aspects of Indian life, was certainly in the person and work of Gandhi. This movement is still alive in the works of Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan and other Gandhians. Neo-traditional response is based on an ideology that is designed to keep change to a minimum and defend the *status quo* as far as possible. K. Damodaran sees this kind of response in the writings of leaders like K.M. Munshi, C. Rajagopalachari

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[4]Robert N. Bellah, "Epilogue" in *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia*, ed. by him. Free Press, New York, 1965, p. 215.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 207.

[6]K.M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of the New India*, p. 36.

and Sampurnanand. They use Vedantic texts to uphold the sanctity of private property and attempt to thwart all kinds of social changes.[7]

In most of the developing countries of Asia and Africa, modernity is associated with the technologically advanced West, and the religion which gave impetus to this advancement, namely Christianity. Most of the leaders of the new nations of these two continents look to the West for scientific and technological help so that they also can enjoy the fruits of modernity. This transition entails a serious moral dilemma, the dilemma of giving up the traditional way of life and the values that preserved it. In India, leaders like Tilak, Gandhi and Aurobindo were aware of this dilemma and theirs was an attempt to preserve the traditional values of Indian culture and spirituality without being blind to the possibilities of modernity and modernization. Edward Shils points out that the main pre-occupation of leaders in the newly independent nations has been or is how to preserve the unique identity of their traditional culture without sacrificing any aspect which is of value in accordance with universal standards.[8] So, the task of the Indian leaders has been reconciling the imperatives of modern progress with their stress on efficiency, rationality and other less clearly defined modern values with a continuity of tradition which maintains the identity of the community. The redeeming feature in this difficult task, as C.D. Deshmukh observes, is that the philosophic concepts of the Indian tradition, especially as revealed in the *Gītā*, are in no sense antagonistic to these modern values. Deshmukh points to the ". . . reforms of the saints and religious leaders, who sought to propogate philosophical concepts more in harmony with modern values . . . for instance human brotherhood, equalitarianism, etc."[9] as the forerunners of the modern leaders.

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[7]Cf. K. Damodaran, *Indian Thought—A Critical Survey*, p. 489.

[8]Cf. Edward Shils, "The Intellectual Between Tradition and Modernity: The Indian Situation", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Supplement I, p. 37.

[9]C.D. Deshmukh, "Discussions" in *Tradition and Modernity in India*, ed. by A.B. Shah and C.R.M. Rao, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1965, p. 98.

Broadly speaking, modernity is not quite new in India; it is more than a hundred years old and has been making a steady headway. The introduction of the western system of education in 1857 and the advent of a free press may be located as the beginnings of modernity. Marx locates the beginnings of modernity in India in the introduction of railways in 1853. He ventured to prophesy that the "railroads along with the multiplication of roads . . . will destroy village isolation and its accompanying 'self sufficient inertia' by supplying that intercourse with other villages without which 'the desire and efforts indispensable to social advance' are absent".[10] Marx obviously identifies modernity with the industrial society of the West. Marx assumed that the "social advance" created by modern industry and transportation would eventually lead India to socialism. Indian intellectuals, from the days of the introduction of the above elements of modernity live in a state of tension, tension between tradition and modernity. The means to overcome this tension as evidenced in the writings of the Indian leaders we have discussed in earlier chapters is that of transvaluing tradition itself.

In the context of the challenge of modernity, Indian intellectuals address themselves to these questions. What is the meaning of modernity? How far is Indian tradition reconcilable with modernity? "What can we do with our theories of *Karma* or incarnation, or the *Varṇāshrama*, to solve the problems that face us today?"[11] Indian intellectuals locate the heart of modernity in the universities, "for modernity has to be identified with the liberal spirit in its broadest sense and, above all, with the restless search for truth which is science".[12] A.B. Shah and many others accept this definition primarily because, in their evaluation the technical and economic progress of the West is a byproduct of this engage-

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[10]L.I. Rudolph and S.H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition*, p. 22.

[11]V.K.N. Menon, "Discussions", *Tradition and Modernity in India*, p. 136.

[12]A.B. Shah, "Introduction", *Tradition and Modernity in India*, p. 19.

ment with truth. Shah also makes a distinction between modernity and modernization. The latter refers "to civilization and mainly implies a high level of literacy and urbanization with vertical and geographical mobility, a high *per capita* income and a sophisticated economy that has gone beyond the take-off stage."[13] Western scholars do not make this distinction. It is interesting to recall George Grant's description of modernity. He says, "The first public movement of modernity was in the English-speaking world. This movement brought into being the worlds of liberal constitutionalism and capitalism. To do so it had to demolish the world of the throne and the altar which had been the public expression that the pre-suppositions of Athens and Jerusalem had generally taken in their strange blending in Western Europe. This English speaking modernity began that public enucleation of the modern with its exaltation of motion over rest, of potentiality over actuality, of interest as detached from virtue."[14] The question that is not asked by the post-Gandhian leaders of India is this: Can the world of Vyasa, Śankara and Gandhi stand up to face the powerful onslaught of modernity without demolishing the essential values of that world? In their enthusiasm to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, this question is not raised at all.

Gandhi and other national leaders whose ideology we have discussed, were fully aware of the dangers of this confrontation with modernity. That is why Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, and others were opposed to large scale industrialization, that is the accepted synonym of modernization.[15] Vinoba

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[13]*ioc. cit.*

[14]George Grant, "Revolution and Tradition", in *Tradition and Revolution,* ed. by Lionel Rubinoff, McMillan of Canada, Toronto, 1971, p. 88.

[15]David E. Apter opposes this identification of modernization and industrialization. He writes, "Modernization and industrialization are not the same. Failure to recognize their differences is a common weakness among many contemporary political leaders, who see the need to restructure the roles primarily as these are functional to the industrialization of society" ("Political Religion in New Nations", *Old Societies and New States, The Quest for modernity in Asia and*

Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan present *Sarvodaya* as an alternate ideology that can save the community from the dehumanizing powers of industrialization. All these men turned to the *Gītā*, for they knew the role of religion in paving the way for the welfare and upliftment of the community. For them, that was progess, and progress had a different meaning than it has in the industrial society. By turning to a religious text, Gandhi and others were not shunting their responsibility to face the present. On the other hand, they tapped the possibilities of this religious text to make changes meaningful in the final analysis. One of the conditions for modernization (in the wider sense) according to David E. Apter, is "a social system that can constantly innovate without falling apart, including innovation of beliefs about the acceptability of change."[16] Through their commentaries on the *Gītā*, Tilak, Gandhi, *et. al.*, prepared the Indian society for change and even asserted that the *Gītā* calls for change. The great influence of these commentaries on the Indian people demonstrates the power of traditional and religious ideologies over other ideologies. As Robert N. Bellah observes: "They (religious symbols and ideologies) state or suggest what reality ultimately is, what the source of order (and often of disorder) in the universe is, what sort of authority in the most general terms is acceptable to men, and what sort of action by individuals makes sense in such a world."[17] This realization of the enormous power of religion and religious ideology on a nation must have been the reason that prompted many a national leader to write commentaries on the *Gītā*.

The New Dharmakṣetra

Kṛṣṇa delivers the message embodied in the *Gītā* in the field of the Kurus *(Kurukṣetra)*. This field was known as *dharma-*

Africa, ed. by Clifford Guntz, The Free Press, New York, 1963, p. 60). Apter takes this position, because he does not make any distinction between modernity and modernization as we have discussed above.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 62.

[17]Robert N. Bellah, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-172.

kṣetra (field of righteousness). It cannot be clearly stated whether the field of Kurus was known as *dharmakṣetra* before the *Bhārata* war was fought there to establish righteousness and execute justice. Tilak refers to a story in the *Mahābhārata* and says that according to the blessing given to Kuru by Indra, "all those who die on that field in war or while performing religious austerities would obtain Heaven . . . As a result of this blessing, this field came to be called '*dharmakṣetra*' or sacred ground".[18] Radhakrishnan and Gandhi see *dharmakṣetra* more symbolically than historically. To Radhakrishnan the whole world is *dharmakṣetra*, the battleground for a moral struggle. He writes, "The world is *dharmakṣetra*, the nursery of saints where the sacred flame of spirit is never permitted to go out."[19] Gandhi individualized the symbol and states, "The human body is the battlefield where the eternal duel between Right and Wrong goes on."[20] Aurobindo has no difficulty in accepting the actual context of war. The field of strife and destruction turns into a sacred field because so many lives were sacrificed for the cause of justice.[21] In the final analysis, it may be futile to excavate the field of the Kurus to establish or discount the historicity of the *Bhārata* war. For, as Ernest Cassirer puts it, "What we call 'historical consciousness' is a very late product of human civilization".[22] The *Gītā* contains many mythical elements, and as such it cannot be viewed as a historical document at all. Mythical or pre-logical it may. But the author of the *Gītā* addressed himself to his contemporaries and it is a valid truth of experience that the voice of those who spoke to their contemporaries echo in the corridors of the future. That is how the message of the *Gītā* becomes meaningful in the Twentieth Century. Again, to cite a very pertinent observation of Cassirer: "To be sure all

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[18]B.G. Tilak, *Gītā-Rahasya*, p. 852.

[19]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 79.

[20]M.K. Gandhi, *Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 135.

[21]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, pp. 36-37.

[22]Ernest Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1944, p. 172.

attempts to intellectualize myth . . . have completely failed. They ignored the fundamental facts of mythical experience. The real substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but of feeling."[23] The modern exegetes of the *Gītā* in spite of their attempt to intellectualize the context and content of the text, have not lost sight of this important aspect of hermeneutics.

Tilak was the first Indian national leader to bring out the meaning of the righteous war *(dharmayuddha)* in the *dharmakṣetra,* for modern India. He boldly stated that not only one's immediate field of activity but the whole of India is the *dharmakṣetra* of modern Indians.[24] Following Tilak's lead, Aurobindo quickly related the message of the *Bhārata* war with the militant Indian nationalism. Drawing out the lessons of the ancient *Bhārata* war had widespread repercussions in the national life, and the direction of the national movement itself was affected not a little by this. The exhortations of Tilak, Aurobindo and others aimed to instil manliness on the Indian people as did Kṛṣṇa coax Arjuna to fulfil his *dharma.* In the new field of righteousness, *dharmakṣetra,* every Indian has to heed the message of Kṛṣṇa and follow the steps of Arjuna. Tilak believed that this was the only way of salvation for India. Gandhi, through his symbolic interpretations of the *Bhārata* war and his commitment to *ahiṁsā* raised the national movement to new moral heights. His creed of *ahiṁsā,* as we have seen,[25] was not one of inaction, but action with a greater meaning. To him, action must be *Brahmayajña,* dedication to God, and it must not injure any other being. The secret of this action, as Gandhi tirelessly preached to India and the world, is non-attachment to the results of action.

The national leaders, whose commentaries on the *Gītā* we have discussed above, share the central aspect of the doctrine of activism or energism as Tilak presented. Hinduism has been described as a "world and life negating religion" by

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[23]*Ibid.*, p. 81.
[24]See chapter V, (pp. 165-171).
[25]See chapter IV, (pp. 113-125).

such people as Albert Schweitzer.[26] The Indian writers were aware of the Upaniṣadic orientations towards monism and mysticism. They grasped the affirmative aspects of Vedanta as articulated in the *Gītā*. Thus, the *Karmayogaśāstra* of the *Gītā* became a reply to the critics of Hinduism. This was aimed not at the non-Hindu critic but even at the village Indian who is passively resigned to his humble lot. The pathetic contentment of the pious Indian finds a great challenge in the writings of Tilak, Aurobindo and others. Indira Rothermund refers to the new possibilities of the *Karmayogaśāstra*, when she says, "The Indian farmers could be persuaded to put in greater effort to improve their lot by pointing out to them, for example, that Lord Krishna in the *Gītā* had emphasized this type of activity".[27] The *Gītā* as *mokṣaśāstra* never before touched the socio economic realms of Indian life as it did in the expositions of the modern national leaders.

The *Gītā* gives another meaning to *Kṣetra*, the field. The human body is called the field and he who knows the body is called *Kṣetrajña*.[28] "*Kṣetrajña*", says Radhakrishnan, "is the supreme lord, not an object in the world".[29] This supreme lord dwells in the individual as the light of awareness, the knower of all objects. The Hindu temple is also called *Kṣetraṁ*, for there dwells God in the form of the idol which is ritually dedicated; *Kṣterajña* dwells in the *Kṣetraṁ*. The *Gītā* also speaks of the divine character, (*daivi sampat*) and demoniac character (*asuri sampat*) of a human person. These are acquired according to the *guṇas* that constitute a person.[30] Here one can see support for the Gandhian interpretation of the human body as the battleground between the forces of

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[26]Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, *al paccim*,

[27]Indira Rothermund "Discussions", *Tradition and Modernity in India* p. 125.

[28]*idaṁ śarīraṁ kaunteya kṣetram ity adhidhīyate*
etad yo vetti taṁ prahuḥ kṣetrajña iti tadvidaḥ. (Bhagavadgītā XIII. 1).

[29]Radhakrishnan. The *Bhagavadgītā*, p. 301.

[30]Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, Ch. XVI, 1-10 See also Chapter II, (pp. 26-30).

good and evil. However, the concept of the human body as a sacred temple where the supreme *Puruṣa* dwells is something novel in the Hindu understanding of the human person. "As a subject", writes Radhakrishnan, "he enters into infinity and infinity enters into him. *Kṣetrajña* is the universal in an individually unrepeatable form. The human being is a union of the universal-infinite and the universal-particular".[31] This new unerstanding of the human person renders meaning to service. In the traditional view, human suffering has been understood as the result of one's *Karma* and that person has to reap the consequences of what he had sowed. As against this, the recognition of God's presence in the afflicted man, brings a new dimension to social life itself. Gandhi called the poor of India, *Daridra Narayana*, God the poor. To him, the village India was his new *dharmakṣetra* where he fought against untouchability and other evils. It may be said that the new interpretations of *Kṣetra and Kṣetrajña* led many Indians to appreciate "the dictum that service of man is service of God, that *mānava seva* is *Mādhava seva*".[32] Partly under the inspiration of this new social consciousness generated by the *Gītā*, Rabindranath Tagore sings:

> Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!
> Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner
> of a temple with doors all shut?
> Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!
> He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
> and where the path-maker is breaking stones
> He is with them in sun and in shower,
> and his garment is covered with dust.[33]

To the Neo-Vedantins, this song is an expression of the Vedantic doctrine of God's all-prevasiveness. Jawaharlal

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[31]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 301.

[32]P. Sankaranarayanan, "Human Person, Society and State; The classical Hindu Approach" in *Human Person Society and State*, ed. by P.D. Devanandan and M.M. Thomas, Committee for Literature on Social Concerns, Bangalore, 1957. p. 75.

[33]Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, verse 11.

Nehru, who has not professed any religious faith, goes one step further and declares that the new temples of India are the dams and the hydro-electric schemes which irrigate the fields and light the streets.

Evolution of New Ethics

Many western writers, Albert Schweitzer, Henri Bergson, *et. al.* viewed Hinduism as an otherworldly religion. Bergson points out that Indian mystics are lost in contemplation or vision of God and fight shy of action which is said to be a weakening of contemplation.[34] Schweitzer holds the view that monistic Indian thought has perfected mysticism and it has the courage to stand apart from ethics and to realize that ethics cannot be won from the knowledge of the universe. This is one of the major themes of his book *Indian Thought and Its Development*. The union with the Absolute of which the Upaniṣads speak is not ethical, but spiritual. Schweitzer writes, "Of this deep distinction Indian thought has become conscious. With the most varied phrasing it repeats the proposition: Spirituality is not ethics . . . 'Mysticism is not a friend of ethics but a foe. It devours ethics'."[35] The commentaries on the *Gītā* we discussed in the early chapters may be considered as an attempt on the part of the Indian writers to correct these views. Surely enough, there is a mystic approach in the Upaniṣads. Renouncing the world in search of spiritual pursuits has been a dominant theme of the Indian scriptures. Modern writers such as Tilak believe that the *ācāryas* placed less emphasis than it was necessary on this aspect of the religious life. Tilak's major burden in his commentary is to show the validity of *Karmayoga* to attain the final liberation.[36] With the possible exception of Aurobindo (he gives supreme importance to *gnosis*)[37] to commentators we discussed attempt to derive ethical principles for modern man from the teachings of the *Gītā*.

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[34]Referred by S. Radhakrishnan, "Reply to Critics," *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, p. 802.

[35]Albert Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, p. 234.

[36]Cf. chapter III above (pp. 65-89).

[37]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gītā*, p. 27ff,

The re-interpretation of *dharma* and *svadharma*[38] has been the first step in creating a new concept of ethics for the Indian people. The idea of *lokasaṁgraha,* welfare of the world, brought to light a hitherto hidden relationship between religion and secular pursuits. Arjuna, who wanted to lay down arms and to renounce the world, has been coaxed into action for the sake of *lokasaṁgraha.* Tilak attaches great importance to this. He holds that no one can escape from the responsibility of working for the welfare of the world. He writes, "The *Gītā* does not . . . admit the position that the *Jnanin* has a right to give up Action; and *lokasaṁgraha* is the most important reason . . . for the *Jñānin* not doing so. . . . Man has not come to this wold merely for his own benefit."[39] This is a great departure from the teachings of classical Hinduism. Tilak's (Gandhi's and Radhakrishnan's to a lesser extent) enucleation of the *Gītā* concept of *lokasṁagraha* is in sharp contrast not only with the *ācāryas* but also with the purely idealistic approach of some modern Indian writers, who are indifferent to the problems of every day life. Surama Das Gupta's following statement may be taken as an example of the idealistic approach. She states, "If we have faith in the true abiding nature of our self and attribute highest value to it, we can take in the worldly happenings as mere appearances which have no value in themselves. . . . Of what consequence can be the reward, or insult, wealth or poverty, success or failure, to us when we, as immortal spiritual beings, are striving to open up the secret of treasure of all spiritual delight and blessings?"[40] T.M.P. Mahadevan makes a statement in the same vein, "The mortal illness which affects modern man is excessive outwardness. If he should be saved, he must be made to turn back from his meaningless race for material power . . . True happiness lies within. It can be attained only by him who is not misled by the outer look of things, but succeeds in getting out their soul and

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[38]Cf. chapter II above (pp. 22-30).

[39]B.G. Tilak, *Gītā-Rahahasya*, p. 459.

[40]Surama Das Gupta, *The Development of Moral Philosophy in India*, Orient Longman's, Calcutta, 1961, p. 99.

rediscovers then his true self".[41] In spite of the protest of the thorough-going Advaitins, the dynamic philosophy of service and action forged by Tilak on the basis of the *Gītā* continue to influence Indian national life. It may be said that Tilak signalled the descent of Vedanta from metaphysical plane to the ethical plane. Raj Krishna rightly observes that Tilak tried to supply the philosophical proof and Gandhi the practical demonstration that action for the welfare of the world could be direct means of liberation.[42]

Modern Indian thinkers have tried to establish, on the basis of the ethics of the *Gītā*, a new code of conduct for the nation that assures man freedom from the evils of modern civilization such as imperialism, capitalism, gross materialism, etc. In this they have to draw new meanings from the old theological concepts. Radhakrishnan holds that the central purpose of the *Gītā* according to the context of its birth, is to solve the problem of life and conduct. Thus, it is an ethical treatise, a *yoga-śāstra*. He says, "The *Gītā* was formulated in a period of ethical religion and so shared the feelings of the age".[43] But, the ethics of the *Gītā* sprang from the metaphysics of the Upaniṣads it shares. In the words of Radhakrishnan, "The *Gītā* is an application of the Upaniṣad ideal to the new situations which arose at the time of the *Mahābhārata*".[44] This application is extended to the twentieth century India by our authors. That is how the message which enthused Arjuna to fulfil his caste-duty became a new ethical philosophy potent to save the world. Radhakrishnan is very emphatic on this soteriological purpose of the *Gītā*. According to him, "The *Gītā* is interested in the process of redeeming the world",[45] and it urges us "to live in the world and save it".[46] We may note that the Neo-Vedantins as a

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[41]T.M.P. Mahadevan, "The Re-discovery of Man", *Indo-Asian Culture, July 1956.*

[42]Cf. Raj Krishna, "Vedanta and Social Reform, A Contemporary challenge", *Human Person, Society and State*, p. 3.

[43]S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 532.

[44]*Ibid.*, p. 530.

[45]S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 26.

[46]*Ibid.*, p. 67.

whole based their ethical philosophy on the doctrine of the identity of the human soul with Brahman and this doctrine has been pressed into the service of nationalism, democracy, equality and sarvodaya, upliftment of all. In this process, a new ethics has been evolved as against the passive acceptance of the power of *Karma* on human lives.

Limitations of a Religious Text

An ancient religious text by its very nature suffers many limitations when applied to solve the problems of contemporary society. The *Gītā* is no exception to this, for it was not written with our problems in mind. This "Battlefield version" of Vedanta was enunciated to deliver Arjuna from his predicament and thus he may lead the righteous war. This is not to say that the *Gītā* has no message for New India or that the modern expositions of this text have not influenced the directions of the national life. What is meant is this: All the ideologies that are related to the teachings of the *Gītā* are not simply there. They have their origin elsewhere and the Indian writers in their love and respect for tradition (This was an expedient move in the religious and cultural climate of India) telescoped many a modern concept into the verses of the *Gītā*. The hermeneutical principle of viewing a text against its philosophical and historical context has not been scrupulously followed by the modern Indian commentators of the *Gītā*. Radhakrishnan has a very revealing answer to this criticism. He says, "In the interpretation of history, although we should not take liberties with the text, we should not be satisfied with a mere collection of data. History of philosophy requires the employment of sympathetic imagination and creative insight . . . I do not regard the past as a fossil for scientific curiosity of the excavator".[47] He is right in asserting the application of imagination and creative insight, but there are many instances of transporting modern concepts into the *Gītā*. This is what we called the "*Gītā* alchemy" in our discussion on nationalism.

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[47]S. Radhakrishnan, "Reply to Critics", *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, p. 821.

While Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, Vinoba and others turn to the *Gītā* in support of the Vedantic ideology of equality,[48] there are present-day writers with a Marxist orientation who question the social relevance of the *Gītā*. Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, for example, contends that the *Gītā* has nothing to do with equality.[49] He maintains that the social background of the *Gītā* is feudalistic and the author is concerned with the preservation of the social system that was in vogue. As Kuttipuzha, Ponjikara Rafi, and others who subscribe to the Marxist interpretation of history, see it, the *Gītā* is another religious text used by the dominant classes to perpetuate exploitation of the weaker classes. The *Gītā* teaching on *cāturvarṇa* comes under severe attack by these authors. They point out that *kuladharma*, according to the *Gīta*, is nothing more than caste duties. The *Gītā's* references to the dangers of *varṇasaṁkara* (mixing of castes) and the call to Arjuna to protect the fourfold order of society[50] are viewed by these "progressive" authors as stumbling blocks to social solidarity and national integration. These authors may have a point in exposing the evils of the caste system which traces its origin to the *Gītā* concept of *cāturvarṇa*. On the other hand, these writers betray a lack of appreciation for the spiritual significance of *varṇāśramadharma* embodied in the *Gītā*. Aurobindo's approach to the problem clearly demonstrates the positive aspects of this concept for social and spiritual life.[51]

It is to be noted that none of the national leaders who commented on the *Gītā* questioned the validity of *varṇāśramadharma* for modern India. They were fully aware of the power of tradition on society and therefore tried to explain away, perhaps rather apologetically, the evils of the hierarchical system. Let us cite Gandhi's statement once again on this social question.

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[48]Cf. Chapter VI, (p. 217-219 above).

[49]Cf. Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

[50]*The Bhagavadgītā*, I. 43. See also M. Rangacharya, *op. cit.*, Vol I, p. 363.

[51]Cf. Chapter II, (pp. 56-58).

> *Varṇa* means pre-determination of the choice of man's profession. The law of *varṇa* is that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood. . . . *Varṇa*, therefore, is in a way the law of heredity. . . . It is not a human invention but an immutable law of nature—the statement of a tendency that is ever present, and at work like Newton's law of gravitation.[52]

Gandhi's position is paradoxical in the light of the fact that he was in the forefront of the campaign against the evils of the caste system. This demonstrates the power of tradition on him. From the ultimate Vedantic position, there is no difference between the self of a śūdra or that of a Brahmin. The commentators who attempt to build a doctrine of equality on the basis of certain verses of the *Gītā*[53] do not take into account this contradiction. Even the oft-quoted verse, IX. 32[54] does not speak of *samatva*, equality, as we understand it today. The derogatory reference to the low-born *(pāpa-yonaḥ*, literally those of sinful womb) here, is not an indication of equality at all but of non-difference. A Vedantin sees all creatures with an equal eye *(samadarśinaḥ)*. Viewing a Brahmin, a cow and a dog with an equal eye[55] is not the same as equality. What most of our commentators failed to accept is this: The *Gītā*, like any other scripture, contains the social prejudices, if we want to call the social customs in vogue prejudices, of its time. These prejudices are not part of the religious message of the text. There is no point in torturing the text to yield our ideas, however noble they are. The principles of equality, fraternity, socialism, etc. are modern and the *Gītā* is not a scripture that is written to bring out democratic or socialist ideas.

As we have seen above, Gandhi takes several aspects of the *Gītā* symbolically. To be sure enough, symbol systems and structures are of great importance to religious life. Radhakamal Mukherjee writes, ". . . the social order and

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[52]M.K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 365.
[53]Cf. Chapter VI, (p. 225-228).
[54]Cf. footnote on p. 228 above.
[55]*Bhagavadgītā*, V. 18.

culture that the symbol system constructs are essentially values, sensibilities and aspirations that symbolically and consistently lead human behaviour and society into new dimensions of experience."[56] But Gandhi goes too far when he interprets the Bharata war symbolically and turns to the *Gītā* to learn the lessons of *ahiṁsa*, non-violence. This is to cut off the *Gītā* completely from the great epic *Mahābhārata* whose chapter it is. The story of *Mahābhārata* revolves around the righteous war between Pandavas and the sons of Kuru. We have to state with all respect to Gandhi's integrity, that the roots of his doctrine of *ahiṁsā* lay elsewhere and he found the *Gītā* a useful peg to hang his idea. We do not imply that Gandhi's insistence on "desireless action" also belongs to this category. On the other hand, when Gandhi turns to the *Gītā* to drive home to the Indian people the dignity of labour, he is again importing non-Indian ideas into the *Gītā*. Agehananda Bharati is right when he says, "The importance and dignity of physical work is a western ideological import into nineteenth century India. There is no support in any Indian text-religious or secular—for this notion previous to contact with the modern West."[57] It seems that Gandhi and other commentators turned to the *Gītā* because it provides them with greater freedom for socio-centric interpretation than any other Hindu scripture.

It is interesting to note that there are some modern Indian writers who acknowledge the source of reformistic and modernistic ideas which play a crucial role in Indian life today. D.S. Sarma observes, "It cannot be denied that in every period of decadence, especially after we lost our political independence, we sought refuge in asceticism and other-worldliness and preferred a life of renunciation to a life of healthy action".[58] He notes that the new interest in the *Gītā* as evidenced by the commentaries of Tilak, Aurobindo,

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[56]Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Symbolic Life of Man*, Hind Kitabs, Bombay, 1959, p. 79.

[57]Agehananda Bharati, "Gandhi's Interpretations of the *Gītā*", *Gandhi, India and the World*, p. 65.

[58]D.S. Sarma, *Studies in the Renaissance of Hinduism*, Banaras Hindu University, Banaras, 1944, p. 638.

Gandhi, *et. al.* is an indication of a changed outlook. But, he goes on to add, "And it must be confessed that the emphasis which our religious leaders, . . . have laid on social service is due to the object-lessons provided by the Christian missions".[59] There is no doubt that ideological revolution has been taking place in India ever since the British started to break up economic and social set up of India. M.N. Srinivas calls this "a sea-change in the minds of the Indian intellectuals as far as the activity in this world is concerned." He explains the content of this change as follows:

> A certain lack of faith in the ability of human effort to relieve human suffering seems to have characterized Indian intellectuals in pre-British times. . . . The idea of *Māya* and the stress on the need to achieve one's own salvation are related to the collective helplessness. Prolonged contact with the West, however, resulted in the Indian elites becoming activist and this-worldly. It is a matter of common knowledge that Lokamanya Tilak spent the eight years of his incarceration in the Mandalay jail writing the *Gītā-Rahasya* in which he gave an activist interpretation. It is significant that he should have sought sanction for action in the world from the *Gītā*. Mahatma Gandhi was a great activist and he regarded politics as applied religion. In Pandit Nehru activism exists divorced from religion.[60]

Though this statement betrays a lack of appreciation for the religious factors that promoted the winds of change, its frankness is worthy of respect. There is nothing to be ashamed of in borrowing ideas from other cultures and traditions. On the other hand, it is not a healthy tendency to turn to the ancient texts to dig out modern ideas which are not there.

The national leaders of India faced the thorny communal problem when they presented the *Gītā* as the political *vade-mecum* of modern India. The minority communities were

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[59] *Ibid.*, p. 639.

[60] M.N. Srinivas *Economic Weekly, Annual Number* Feb. 1962, p. 37.

not prepared to accept the liberal ideas of the *Gītā* as national ideas. For them, the *Gītā* was primarily a Hindu religious text. The Indian national movement when it joined hands with Hindu revivalism, lost its universal appeal. There are Indian writers who believe that the excessive application of Hindu religious concepts into the national movement led to the birth of the Muslim league and eventually the partition of India. E.M.S. Namboodiripad writes, "The organisation of *Ganesh Pooja* and other celebrations of a political-cum-religious character by Tilak; . . . the adoption of *Vande-mātaraṁ* as national song, and so on, were just a few of the instances showing the inseparable connection between nationalism and revivalism".[61] Thus, the very ideas introduced into the political programmes to unite the nation, became causes for division. M.N. Srinivas gives a sociological reason for this. He writes, "The concept of the unity of India finds expression from very early period, but it is obvious that in a multi-religious country this is not enough. In fact, any symbol or idea that binds together the members of a particular religion divides them at the same time from members of other religions".[62] This sociological aspect has been overlooked by many national leaders who turned to the *Gītā* to forge a national unity.

The Secular Possibilities of the Gītā

What we have pointed out above as limitations of a religious text in its application to the social, political and economic life of the nation by no means exhaust the secular possibilities of the *Gītā*. We have seen these possibilities revealed in the writings of the Indian national leaders and leaders of thought. It is true that early revivalists like Tilak could not separate India and Hindu *Dharma* and thereby revivalism has to be grounded in the Hindu tradition. To this extent the *Gītā* was invariably seen as a theological text. But, in Gandhi and Bhave, it is not so much a theological text. For

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[61]E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *Economics and Politics of India's Socialist Pattern*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1966, p. 385.

[62]M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, p. 12.

them, the *Gītā* is a text that went beyond nationalism and even beyond religious differences. If a religious text has to be chosen with the potentiality for overcoming the differences between religions and with an appeal to all human beings on a strictly ethical basis, the *Gītā* was the text as Gandhi saw it. This point of view is shared by Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Kalelkar, and others. It is also considerably re-inforced by a number of commentaries on the *Gītā* written by non-Indians. The interest of the western scholars from Edwin Arnold onwards demonstrates the wider spiritual appeal of this text. So, the effort on the part of Gandhi and others was to make the *Gītā* more than a scripture of Hinduism. On the part of these commentators there was a deliberate and dedicated attempt to explore the enormous secular potentalities of this religious text.

In the twentieth century Indian context secularism and secularisation do not mean opposition to religion as it is sometimes understood in the West. In the cultural and religious history of the West, as Charles C. West observes, "the word [secularism, derived from the Latin *saeculum*] was used for centuries to designate participation in the world as distinct from living in a strictly religious realm".[63] In the Marxian communist tradition secularism means an active hostility to religion and religious practices. Secularism in India has more in common with the liberal democratic tradition of the West than the two concepts mentioned above. Jawaharlal Nehru, the architect of secular state in Indian defines it as follows: "It is a state that protects all religions; does not favour one at the expense of the other; does not adopt one as State Religion."[64] For Nehru and the Indian Constitution, this meant a divorce of state from religion comparable to the separation of the state and the church in the tradition of certain western democracies. Donald E. Smith re-formulates Nehru's definition of the secular state in the following words: "The secular state is a state which guaran-

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[63]Charles C. West, "Towards an Understanding of Secularism", in *Religion and Society*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (March 1962), p. 47.

[64]Quoted by P.K. Sundaram, "Hinduism and Secularism", in *Religion and Society*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (March 1962), p. 16.

tees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion".[65]

Some aspects of secularism as promoted by Nehru and envisioned by the Indian constitution, are certainly new to India. Nehru claimed that his outlook on life is pagan and added that "secularised paganism" is the best possible basis for an open society. He says, "I have a pagan outlook on life. Paganism has been used as a term of abuse, but I like it. It is an outlook of 'live and let live'. In ancient Rome, there were altars for many gods, and there was one for the unknown god lest some god must be left out".[66] The attitude of toleration and to some extent acceptance of other forms of faith prevalent in India springs from the teachings of the *Gītā*, according to many modern commentators. Nehru obviously has the spirit of toleration in the *Gītā* in mind when he says, "The outlook of peace, toleration and co-existence is in tune with Indian thought and philosophy".[67] The spirit of the *Gītā*, though at times engulfed by the evil forces at work in history, exerted great influence on the Indian nation. There are writers who trace the influence of the *Gītā* on the liberal policies of Emperor Asoka. P.K. Sundaram writes, "Asoka made it known that harmony is good, *sanvaya eva sudhuh*, and that all faiths of men are to be respected".[68] The twelfth edict of Asoka clearly incorporates this spirit of toleration. It says, "His sacred Majesty the King does reverence to men of all sects, whether ascetics or householders". It may be said that Kabir the fifteenth century prophet of Hindu Muslim unity embodies the liberal spirit of the *Gītā*. The following utterance of Kabir is truly in line with the spirit of the *Gītā*. "The Hindu God lives at Banaras; the Muslim God at Mecca. But he who made the

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[66]Donald E. Smith, *India as a Secular State*, p. 4.

[66]*Hindu*, July 8, 1955.

[67]R.K. Karanjia *The Mind of Mr. Nehru*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1960, p. 57.

[68]P.K. Sundaram, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

world lives not in a city made by hand. There is one Father of Hindu and Muslim, one God in all matter''.[69]

In order to bring out the relevance of the *Gītā* in the modern Indian context, the commentators had to go beyond the traditional stand of treating the *Gītā* as a strictly theological text. Obviously, this does not amount to saying that these efforts actually bore fruit in overcoming the immense religious conflicts rampant in India or to win acceptance of sizable religious communities like Islam. However, there have been influential leaders in minority communities who shared the spirit of toleration taught by the *Gītā*. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad speaks with a sense of complete identification with this tradition: ''In other countries, differences of thought and action led to mutal warfare and bloodshed but in India they were resolved in a spirit of compromise and toleration. Here, every kind of faith, every kind of culture, every mode of living was allowed to flourish and find its own salvation''.[70] There are many Indian Christian leaders who treat the message of the *Gītā* with great reverence. The writings of A.J. Appaswamy, P.D. Devanandan, Anjilvel V. Matthew and others bear witness to this. Matthew, as a Christian, maintains that Jesus Christ ''was the fulfilment of the law and the prophets and similarly also of the Upanishad and the *Gītā*''.[71] This is clearly a deviation from the traditional Christian approach to other scriptures. Matthew acknowledges the universality of the *Gītā* in the following words: ''. . . This lesson of the universality of God's concern for all people and His willingness to accept all who turn to Him in true adoration is presented in the *Gīta* in characteristic Hindu religious language''.[72]

The generosity and the liberality with which the *Gītā* has been interpreted in this century created a climate for the creation of the secular state in India. It is the religious text

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[69]*Ibid.*, p. 18.

[70]Abul Kalam Azad, *Speeches of Maulana Azad*, Publications Division, Government of India, Delhi, 1956, p. 21.

[71]Anjilvel V. Matthew, *The Message of the Gītā*, Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore, 1969, p. 4.

[72]*Ibid.*, p. 20.

which called upon the believers to go beyond sectarian barriers and work for the welfare of the world. Its spirit of toleration provided a theoretical basis for secularism. "A theory which has strong roots", writes Donald E. Smith, "in the indigenous thought and culture of India, as this one has, is an invaluable asset in creating a deep sense of acceptance of the secular state. Intellectually, psychologically, and religiously, the theory is a powerful one in developing the broad-based conviction that secularism *belongs* in India."[73]

The modern commentaries of the *Gītā* added a greater significance to secular pursuits as opposed to the virtues of renunciation extolled in the traditional commentaries. The essential quest in contemporary India is to discover a religious basis for secularism that has been accepted as a national ideology. Many Indians find that basis in the *Gītā* and they maintain that this great text lends its support to earthly preoccupations calling "for active involvement in purposive plans, for the development of long-neglected natural resources, the re-ordering of time-honoured social institutions and for a determined effort to concentrate attention more on present welfare of all men *(lokasaṁgraha)* rather than the realization of the ultimate destiny of the individual."[74] A deliberate attempt is made to integrate the sacred and the secular, in the writings of Gandhi, Vinoba, Radhakrishnan and others. Radhakrishnan writes, ". . . a recognition of spiritual realities not by abstention from the world, but by bringing to its life, its business *(artha)* and its pleasures *(kāma)*, the controlling power of spiritual faith. Life is one, and in it there is no distinction of sacred and secular. *Bhakti* and *Mukti* are not opposed".[75] We may say that this is the implication of the divine command to Arjuna, "Do thou fight". It may be assumed that the spiritual values ensued from the liberal interpretations of the *Gītā* would probably help Indian secular ideology from becoming anti-religious as it happened in some other countries.

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[73]Donald E. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

[74]P.D. Devanandan, "Contemporary Hindu Secularism", *Religion and Society*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (March 1962), p. 22.

[75]S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Society*, pp. 105-106.

From our study of the patterns of interpretations of the *Gītā*, it is clear that the religious consciousness of India is reflected in them as in a prism. At the same time these commentaries serve as widows to discern the patterns of concepts that shape the spiritual and secular life of a nation that gave birth to three major religions of the world. This discernment itself is ultimately a religious act. As E. Spranger puts it ". . . in so far as it (understanding) always refers to the whole man, and actually finds its final completion in the totality of world conditions, all understanding has a religious factor . . . We understand each other in God."[76] It is in this perspective that we realize that it is no accident that the *Gītā* happens to represent the abiding Indian spiritual consciousness, its varieties and multiform possibilities, and it is no accident of history that in the quest for an Indian spiritual identity, national and spiritual leaders have increasingly turned, particularly in modern times, to this immortal book.

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[76]Quoted by G. Van Der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Harper and Row, New York, 1963, Vol. II, p. 684.

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